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Radical Housewife Activism: Subverting the Toxic Public/Private Binary

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In partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts in Environmental Analysis at Pomona College



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“The hope for a better future lies with these women ... long live the hysterical housewives” – Penny Newman¹

¹ Newman, Penny. "The Grassroots Movement for Environmental Justice: Fighting for Our Lives." *New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy* 3.3 (1993): 87-95. Print: 95.

“How much can human beings take without rebelling?” – Lois Gibbs²

² Gibbs, Lois Marie., and Murray Levine. *Love Canal: My Story*. Albany: State University of New York, 1982. Print: 153.

Since the 1960s, the modern environmental movement, though generally liberal in nature, has historically excluded a variety of serious and influential groups. With the origins of the conservation ethic in the late 19th century—the historical ideal that wilderness should be maintained in its “natural” state—reverence for the environment was set up as a white man’s pursuit. Admiration for nature and its protection was framed as an interest for sportsmen and wealthy, privileged, white males who could afford leisurely activities like hunting or hiking. Much like any other movement, marginalized groups within the environmental movement have had to fight for their voice within the context of the greater campaign. Though these subordinated groups are varied and each essential in their own ways for the advance of environmentalism in the United States and globally, I have chosen to focus on a specific segment of these dominated populations—women; and emphasize the historically persistent gendering of environmentalism in U.S. history. I will concentrate on the movement of working-class housewives who emerged into popular American consciousness in the seventies and eighties with their increasingly radical campaigns against toxic contamination in their respective communities. These women, often white but not always so, represent a group who exhibited the convergence of cultural influences from *Silent Spring* and the *Feminine Mystique*—where domesticity and environmentalism met in the middle of American society, and the increasing focus on public health in the environmental movement framed the fight undertaken by women who identified as “housewives.” The working class of these women demonstrated the beginnings of a shift from the origins of middle-class housewife movements towards a more environmental justice paradigm within the environmental movement, focusing on the environmental subjugation of underrepresented groups.

The first chapter of this thesis will cover the theoretical underpinnings for the creation of a housewife activist movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Earlier, in the 1950s and 1960s, a generation of white middle-class housewives embraced the environmental crusade with community conservation movements. These women took up the cause for cleaner air, more pristine suburbs and general community improvements. Largely grassroots, these housewives were able to bring about demonstrated change in the ever-male-dominated environmental movement. Housewife community environmental movements in the 1950s and 1960s would become the predecessors for later radical

working-class housewife activist movements, who would reinvent the earlier model with the addition of modern influences.³

My research will focus on working-class white women because of their self-categorization and utilization of housewife activism as a tool. Because of their class, these women faced environmental injustice in the continued and all too often construction of blue-collar residential areas near, or on top of, former toxic dumpsites or the migration of industry to these areas. But, these activists were also privileged in their ability to consciously adopt the image of the “everyday woman” in their media and activist campaigns. A key element in the success of housewives in the seventies and eighties, though less wealthy than their “housewife activist” counterparts in the forties, fifties and sixties, was their position as white, “everyday homemakers.” Not included in this thesis is the full and important contributions of other marginalized groups, such as people of color, who contributed to the specific campaigns explained in this paper, but who gained less media attention, often due to even harsher discrimination than against these so-called “housewife activists.”

Female activist movements have made an important base for grassroots environmental organizing, both past and present. The proposed reasons for the predominance of women in these organizations are varied, purported by journalists, historians and scholars alike, but are often essentialist. Though “[s]ocial research provides empirical evidence to support the claim that women typically demonstrate a higher level of concern for environmental issues than men,”⁴ this is a contentious point. A 1999 edition of *Homemaker's Magazine*, with the feature “Nature Made It, Women Saved It”⁵ demonstrates the continued connection between a caring dialectic and female environmental activists. The reasoning connected to the origins of female environmentalism extends back to historical philosophies of women’s assumedly deeper connections to nature. Ecofeminism, the ideology that women are inherently closer to the

³ Rome, Adam. ““Give Earth a Chance”: The Environmental Movement and the Sixties.” *The Journal of American History* 90 (2003): 525-54. JSTOR. Web: 537.

⁴ MacGregor, Sherilyn. *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care*. Vancouver: UBC, 2006. Print: 5.

⁵ Ibid. 5.

natural world, frames female activism as an organically occurring phenomenon.⁶ However, the women I will focus on, who utilized and emphasized their status as housewives in order to advance activist goals, are closer to the ideology Mary Mellor calls feminist environmentalism,⁷ combining feminist recognition of the marginalization of women and their lack of access to decision making within society and the effects of environmental degradation that are directly and indirectly associated with women and their lives.

In assessing how female environmental activism has historically formed, social constructions of gender cannot be discounted in explaining the presence of women in grassroots environmental organizations. Because women have been historically relegated to caring positions by society, taking care of children and performing domestic and reproductive labor, they fill roles where environmental health issues are more readily noticeable. However, as Phil Brown and Faith Ferguson argue, “the traits and experiences of women who become toxic waste activists are not theirs simply because they are women who live in proximity to toxic waste hazards; rather, they conceptualize their action both for themselves and a wider public, out of the meaning of womanhood.”⁸ Female toxic waste activists shape their own conceptions of femininity and citizenship in their struggles against toxic waste, using their previous community and familial experience to inform their grassroots paradigm. The very image of the caring mother and the emotional homemaker is a key aspect of what makes housewife activism so potent. Women working within this framework consciously adopt this terminology, project it and define the ways in which it is used. In framing their movement in emotional terms, housewife activists are able to appeal to the sympathy of the American populace through sustained public coverage and retain media attention for their cause, pressuring

⁶ Merchant, Carolyn. “Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory.” *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*. By Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990. Print: 102.

⁷ Mellor, Mary. *Feminism & Ecology*. Washington Square, NY: New York UP, 1997. Print: 22.

⁸ Brown, Phil, and Faith I.T. Ferguson. ““Making a Big Stink”: Women's Work, Women's Relationships, and Toxic Waste Activism.” *Gender and Society* 9 (1995): 145-72. *JSTOR*. Web: 147.

politicians and decision makers. Housewife activism is not limited to environmental causes. In a variety of political issues, women have historically used housewife activism as a tool to gain media attention despite marginalization.

In the second and third chapters of this thesis I will outline two case studies that are emblematic of the wider movement I discuss. Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York became a household name in the 1970s and is now arguably the most ubiquitous example of toxic waste contamination in the United States. Residents in the blue-collar Love Canal neighborhood preeminently fought for relocation of themselves, and the purchase of their homes. Their goal focused on getting out, before treating the waste. Activists in the community consistently used motherhood as a tool to solicit emotion and attention from the news media, as well as radicalized protest to express their demands. These women were eventually successful in gaining government recognition and subsequent relocation.

The Stringfellow Acid Pits are located in once-rural Glen Avon, California—about 45 miles east of Los Angeles. Stringfellow came right after the Love Canal saga and is altogether less well known. But, once the number one priority toxic site in California, Stringfellow as a grossly contaminated dump should not be overlooked. The pits, though not actually within the populated area of the community, overflowed into the unincorporated city's streets on several occasion from the 1960s to the early 1980s. The fight in Glen Avon aimed to remove the dump entirely, rather than relocate citizens. Though a variety of groups were vocal in Glen Avon, those who received the most media recognition were once again working-class housewife activists, who framed their fight in terms of their children and families but used radical methods like attention-getting street theater, likely influenced by student movements of the time.

These two examples are just instances of the working-class housewife activist phenomenon, which has been utilized in a variety of manifestations from Louisiana to Michigan. Though different self-proclaimed housewives and activists have executed their housewife activism in diverse ways, the essence and theoretical groundings for this activism is often the same—appropriating an often demeaning term for the empowerment of wives and mothers in their communities. At both Love Canal and Stringfellow, these women subverted the public/private binary in establishing their own sphere of

community activism and gaining recognition for their demands as citizens and community members. The working-class women who are discussed in this thesis did not have access to many of the privileges of earlier middle-class housewife activists who were able to maintain a network of wealthy citizens who could influence policy. Instead, these working-class activists relied on their positions as radicalized and politicized mothers to gain political recognition.

After recurring disillusionment with government, working-class housewife activists see these mechanisms of gaining recognition as essential to affecting change in their communities. In this thesis I plan to focus on the radicalization of these movements as housewife activist organizations become more disenchanted with traditional change-making infrastructure on the regional, state and federal levels. Kathleen M. Blee defines radicals as “those who seek social, political, or economic changes meant to restructure society in a less egalitarian fashion.”⁹ While these women originally saw themselves as housewives attempting to improve lives for their own children in their own community, they soon become activists fighting for justice as a symbolic and practical measure that would affect other communities, demonstrating their commitment to radical societal change as it relates to toxics regulation. These women also increasingly embraced radical activist methods like dramatic protest and visceral publicity campaigns, akin to radical student movements of the time. The 1960s and early 1970s saw a marked paradigm shift in American political, social and philosophical contexts. Militant student movements tore through urban areas and university campuses. The first Earth Day assembled an increasingly united front in protecting the world’s resources and recognizing the misguided actions of industry. Feminist books like *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and what were then radical manifestos like *The Feminine Mystique* continued challenging many American women’s perception of her place within society and the home. Additionally, “Two major events of the late twentieth century, the Vietnam War and the Watergate political scandal, increased the press’s relevance and importance within society.”¹⁰ The anti-toxics movement was not left behind in these societal shifts, riding on the country’s

⁹ Blee, Kathleen M. *No Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest*. New York: New York UP, 1998. Print: 3.

¹⁰ Hay, Amy M. “Recipe for Disaster: Motherhood and Citizenship at Love Canal.” *Journal of Women’s History* 21.1 (2009): 111-134. Print: 118.

wave of radicalization and utilizing the media as an increasingly essential tool. The concept of increasing radicalization, though it is argued throughout this thesis, will be further developed in the last chapter of this paper.

Embracing the reformation of an identity that focuses on women's power as activists and homemakers is essential to assessing the successes and impacts of the movements at Love Canal and the Stringfellow Acid Pits as well as the wider anti-toxics housewife movement in general. Housewife activists redefined their social symbolism as a domestic ideal and adopted political rhetoric and understandings in order to gain recognition for politicized personal issues. Women working in these ways, a combination of radical and traditional, restructured the idea of the private sphere issue, illuminating the community impacts of toxic waste contamination and demonstrating the inseparability of these two spheres in community politics.

The anti-toxics movement began to gain ground with the publication of *Silent Spring* and the recognition of the detrimental effects of chemicals once considered a panacea to the United States' varied agricultural and military setbacks. Further spurred by the discovery of several toxic waste sites in the late 1970s, including Love Canal, the anti-toxics movement gained widespread recognition as a valid concern in the environmental landscape. In placing family, community and public health at the center of toxics debates, activists added emotional emergency to the scenario, rather than framing it with the often abstract consequences of environmental degradation. In their engagement of public environmental anti-toxics activism, working-class housewife activists have defined their own roles within their communities and fought for the safety of their families and of families experiencing similar plights. These movements were constructed and influenced by the feminist movement, the modern environmental movement and conservation, and the increasingly radical political action of the sixties and seventies. Though these influences were essential to the formation of radical housewife environmental campaigns, women who participated in these actions synthesized their own unique type of activism, which has had a profound influence on the environmental movement and public health in the United States.

Photographs

I have chosen to incorporate original images from the movements at Love Canal and Stringfellow throughout this thesis. These photographs, taken by scholars, residents, government agents and news outlets and then archived, demonstrate the way in which the scenarios at both Love Canal and Stringfellow were portrayed. Many of the images feature children, or allusions to children, once again demonstrating the focus on the emotion of chemical contamination and reiterating activists' purposeful attempts to keep these visceral images in the media to apply political pressure. Many of the images also demonstrate radical political protest, a visual for the theme that wound through working-class housewife activism.

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Chapter 1.

The Female Environmental Activist

Consistently throughout history, women have been compared and essentialized in a supposed close relationship with nature due to either perceived equivalent domination by patriarchal society or increased understanding of nature because of biological condition. These sentiments find their most significant theoretical grounding in ecofeminism, coined by Francois D'Eabonne in 1974, whereby women are empowered through this relationship and are encouraged to work as special protectors of the earth because they share an unspoken and immeasurable bond with nature. D'Eabonne thought, "feminism holds the key to confronting the environmental and inequality problems that beset contemporary societies."¹¹ Though ecofeminism is inspired by feminism and environmentalism, instead of empowering women's environmental movements, the stereotypes the ideology is built off of anthropomorphize women's relationship with nature.¹² I will argue the driving force behind grassroots female activism is closer to feminist environmentalism¹³ or feminist ecology,¹⁴ which bypasses the essentialized view of the commonalities between nature's processes and femaleness associated with ecofeminism, and replaces it with a focus on "women's vulnerability to environmental problems and their lack of access to the cent[er]s of decision-making which cause them."¹⁵ Historian and philosopher Carolyn Merchant discusses "the domination of women and nature inherent in the market economy's use of both as resource," which she views as a social construction.¹⁶ Though women are not inherently or biologically connected to nature, socially constructed ideals of gender and gendered tasks cause

¹¹ Somma, Mark, and Sue Tolleson-Rinehart. "Tracking the Elusive Green Women: Sex, Environmentalism, and Feminism in the United States and Europe." *Political Research Quarterly* 50.1 (1997): 153. JSTOR. Web: 153.

¹² Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980. Print: xix.

¹³ Mellor, Mary. *Feminism & Ecology*. Washington Square, NY: New York UP, 1997. Print: 22.

¹⁴ Engelhardt, Elizabeth Sanders Delwiche. *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2003. Print: 4.

¹⁵ Mellor: 24.

¹⁶ "Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory." 103.

women across the globe to be the most affected by environmental degradation. As Merchant argues,

Because women's physiological functions of reproduction, nurture, and childrearing are viewed as closer to nature, their social role is lower on the cultural scale than that of the male. Women are devalued by their tasks and roles, by their exclusion from community functions whence power is derived, and through symbolism.¹⁷

Women above men handle tasks that are environmentally centered due to deep-rooted societal conceptions of women's work. This can include taking care of children who are more vulnerable to exposure by toxic chemicals, as well as carrying out domestic labor that is undervalued and often environmentally dangerous.

Apart from female involvement in broad environmental organization, the elevated participation of women in anti-toxics campaigns, and grassroots environmental campaigns in general, must be underscored and emphasized. Society more often than not views female activism as an extension of the private role of motherhood rather than as a conscious public decision and "expression of citizenship."¹⁸ Women are seen as women, with its associated societal expectations, first and as people second. The EuroBarometer 37 study, consisting of face-to-face interviews, showed that "women with children at home are not significantly more likely than other women to take pro-environmental positions."¹⁹ Other scholars cite that "Social research provides empirical evidence [in the form of data analysis of social and scientific survey answers] to support the claim that women typically demonstrate a higher level of concern for environmental issues than men" in general. So, while women with children may not be more likely to be driven to the environmental cause, women in general are more concerned than their male counterparts about the status of the environment. These results demonstrate the difficulty in quantifying and identifying women's place within environmental activism and their essentialized reasons for taking part in such activism, but 80 percent of the leaders of

¹⁷ Merchant: 144.

¹⁸ MacGregor: 5.

¹⁹ Somma: 160.

grassroots protests are blue-collar women,²⁰ indicating the impact women do hold in enacting environmental change and in organizing their communities. In interviews with female environmental activists, Sherilyn MacGregor challenged stereotypes of female activists and investigated the cause of heightened female organization efforts in these campaigns. These women claim “women dramatically outnumber men in local quality-of-life campaigns, which, for them, include such issues as pesticide use, lead and water contamination, waste management, and industrial emissions.”²¹ Because women often outnumber men in grassroots movements, claims of caring and maternal instincts pervade discussions of why women gravitate towards this type of organization.

The view that women are inherently more caring due to their sex exposes the importance of unpacking the gendered notions that pervade impressions of female activism. This idea can be echoed in the prevalence of “mothering” based organizations like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Mothers for Clear Air and Mothers for Natural Law, for example. Within these types of organizations, it is clear that women choose to embrace and project their roles as mothers onto their activist activities, rather than consciously avoid this aspect of their identities. This type of activist framework has been utilized as a political strategy in a number of movements apart from environmental affairs. In MacGregor’s interviews “It is noteworthy that a majority of the women claimed to see their activism as part of their role as mothers and citizens; they did not want to separate the two aspects of their identities.”²² Thus, women see themselves as both citizens and mothers, and likely believe that these two aspects of their lives inform each other instead of acting as separate entities or in conflict with each other. Though women with children at home are not significantly more likely to engage in environmental activism, it is possible that when female environmental activists do have children they may more often choose to incorporate this into their activism.

²⁰ Krauss, Celene. "Blue-Collar Women and Toxic-Waste Protests: The Process of Politicization." *Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*. By Richard Hofrichter. Philadelphia: New Society, 1993. Print: 107.

²¹ MacGregor: 16.

²² Ibid. 198.

But, preconceived notions of ecomaternalism, whereby a women's care for nature stems from a mothering and caring disposition²³ have contributed to stereotypes of "hysterical housewives" and "housewife statistics" in the anti-toxics movement. Instead, it is more useful to consider the socially constructed roles of gender in ascertaining the motivations that may contribute to increased willingness among women to engage in environmental protest. The perception of women in the stereotypes of emotional and hysterical has created historical boundaries for activism²⁴ but the branding of mothers has also allowed women to gain more media attention in particular circumstances.

Rather than focusing on female movements as a type of mothering for a larger world, the term ecological feminist strikes closer to the heart of the activist movements I focus on. As Women's Studies and environmental scholar Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt explains, "[E]cological feminisms are not essentialist: women are not necessarily united in sisterhood, nor are they equally oppressed, nor are they the only gender to have a role in enacting justice" and "[e]cological feminism argues that race matters, gender matters, class matters, and that all of us have complicated identities."²⁵ This paradigm shows a discussion more rooted in the principles of environmental justice than the traditional perspective of ecofeminism that often accompanies analyses of female environmental activism movements. Working-class housewife activists have complicated identities, and they choose to disseminate these complicated identities within their activism in order to achieve success in their anti-toxics movements.

The Convergence of the Environmental and Feminist Movements

The housewife activism movement against toxics of the seventies and eighties was shaped by a convergence of the environmental and feminist movements. Though these women did not entirely adopt the language of either, and at times blatantly rejected some radical feminist sentiments, their actions and arguments resembled many of those perpetuated by activists portrayed as radical in the environmental and feminist spheres. These women became increasingly radical in their activist techniques and though I argue

²³ MacGregor: 20.

²⁴ Rome: 539.

²⁵ Engelhardt: 4.

that they were influenced by feminism, it is important to recognize that “even radical mothers and mother-activists do not necessarily identify as feminists, or take feminism seriously.”²⁶ Though these women formed their own unique movement, the creation of their voice came after a seminal time in U.S. history, when the hippie movement, Earth Day and second wave feminism were all gaining ground within the American consciousness of the infamous sixties. All of these movements contributed to what historian Adam Rome calls the “growing discontent of middle-class women”²⁷ — who would form the backbone of influence for the later working-class housewife movement centered more directly on environmental justice and the unequal environmental treatment of the lower-class residents of their communities.

The movement I will focus on is rooted in ideals of domesticity and suburbia as well as radical environmental action. Thus, in order to understand the complex formation, structure and methods of the movement, it is imperative to understand the basis of domesticity and environmentalism in American history. As historian Glenna Matthews writes, “The ideology of domesticity arose in the middle class and may well have been one of the principle means by which the middle class assumed a self-conscious identity.”²⁸ According to Matthews, the ideal of the separate domestic sphere began in the 1850s, as industrialization pushed males who had worked around the home into factory labor. The home then became a sanctuary away from industrial workshops. As the domestic ideal shifted over the next century and life no longer centered on the home as a refuge, “the suburban, middle-class housewife was doubly isolated: physically, by the nature of housing patterns, and spiritually, because she had become merely the general factotum for her family”.²⁹ This shift in the importance of the private sphere left room for expression of homemaker discontent, often symbolized in discussions of *The Feminine Mystique*.

²⁶ Jetter, Alexis, Annelise Orleck, and Diana Taylor. *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right*. UPNE, 1997: 353.

²⁷ Rome: 527.

²⁸ Matthews, Glenna. *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987. Print: xvi.

²⁹ Ibid. xiii.

Because the second-wave women's movement challenged traditional conceptions of the gendered division of domestic work,³⁰ female activists were able to find their footing within the American political landscape apart from the private sphere. Without the erosion of the concept of domesticity, it is unlikely that activists would have been able to utilize their statuses as housewives to partake wholly in public affairs. As the vintage how-to environmentalism book by housewife and senate-wife Betty Ann Ottinger explains, "In our expanded role in American society, we women are now a significant factor in almost every decision that affects environmental quality, although politicians and businessmen have been much too slow to recognize this."³¹ With the groundwork for an increased voice outside the home laid by middle-class "municipal housekeepers," the working-class women detailed in this thesis' case studies were able to adopt the identity of a housewife and use it to their advantage in their environmental fight, somewhat apart from its domestic roots. These working-class women utilized motherly framing similar to earlier housewife activists, but were unique in their use of radical methods borrowed from other movements and their confidence in requiring action from political bodies. Female toxic waste activism is an "encounter [that] involves crossing the boundaries between the traditionally female private domain and the traditionally male public world of politics and policy determination."³² By crossing these lines, anti-toxics housewife activists demonstrate a distinctive relationship to the feminist and environmental movements, as well as a conscious step outside of the domestic sphere.

The historical underpinnings of these housewife activist movements and their theoretical formations were underscored with seminal publications during the 1960s and 1970s, which condensed environmental and domestic issues into forms widely read by the American public. When published in 1962, Rachel Carson's vilification of pesticides, *Silent Spring*, was unsurprisingly rejected by industrial chemical companies, much of the American public and government, but the book did find a receptive audience in suburban

³⁰ Blum, Elizabeth D. *Love Canal Revisited: Race, Class, and Gender in Environmental Activism*. Lawrence, Kan.: University of Kansas, 2008. Print: 122.

³¹ Ottinger, Betty Ann. *What Every Woman Should Know--and Do--about Pollution: A Guide to Good Global Housekeeping*. [New York]: Ep, 1970. Print: 11.

³² "'Making a Big Stink': Women's Work, Women's Relationships, and Toxic Waste Activism." 160.

housewives. Many of these women had noticed changes in their manicured environments much like those described in the eerie portrait Carson paints in her first chapter of the same title. As prominent historian Adam Rome explains, “Because the suburbs were domestic places—and women were traditionally caretakers of the domestic—threats to environmental quality in suburbia were threats to the women’s sphere.”³³ These women, still confident in governmental protections and corporate responsibility, believed applying pressure to these two bodies could yield real results in protecting their neighborhoods and families. They were not entirely wrong, as DDT was banned in 1972, an occurrence largely attributed to Carson’s revelations. Carson, though she did not concentrate her writing on specifically reaching housewives, was a proponent of women’s stake in environmentalism. “In 1954 Carson proclaimed women’s ‘greater intuitive understanding’ of the value of nature” and she also “defended the presence of emotion in science and nature writing.”³⁴ In this way, Carson demonstrated a theme that would become a struggle for housewife activists, marrying the concept of the archetypal and essentialized “emotional woman” with a hard science understanding of environmental issues. Carson was an early example of how women could move past these stereotypes to be considered seriously within environmental fields.

One year after the publication of *Silent Spring*, Betty Friedan “contested the popular image of the postwar, American middle-class homemaker as a woman who found total fulfillment in serving the needs of her husband and children and in volunteering within her local place of worship and community” with her *Feminine Mystique*.³⁵ Friedan’s book existed in the same vein as several others of the time, but was the most popular for its condensation and discussion of the life of the domestic, middle-class mother. Friedan argued that suburbanites were “[c]onvinced by psychologists, advertisers, and producers of popular culture to sacrifice personal goals for the sake of familial stability” and women were thusly “sequestered [...] within the ‘comfortable

³³ Rome: 538.

³⁴ Unger, Nancy C. *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012. Print: 149.

³⁵ Ibid. 150.

concentration camp' of the home."³⁶ Though working-class women did not maintain all of the privileges afforded by the lifestyle described in Friedan's book, they worked in the home much like middle-class housewives. As toxics increasingly pervaded the lives of working-class community mothers, their home was no longer comfortable, and they stepped out to speak. According to American Studies scholar Daniel Horowitz, "Friedan's book not only stood as an important endpoint in the development of 1950s social criticism but also translated that tradition into feminist terms."³⁷ The conveniently close publication dates of these two books held great influence for the housewives of tomorrow. Mothers who had felt some sense of unknown longing or were worried about the chemicals in their households could combine a desire for work outside the home with a desire to create a safer suburb by working on environmental campaigns. Friedan, much like housewife activists, also consciously adopted the housewife image. Daniel Horowitz unpacks the image of her commitments to domesticity when he recognizes her longstanding interest and work in progressive politics and unions. It seems, much like toxic-waste activists, Friedan partially used this image to advance her cause. Though Friedan's audience was wealthier than later toxic waste activists, her discussion of domestic life framed long-lasting conceptions of what it meant to be an American housewife, which would influence societal expectations of working-class housewives in the 1970s and 1980s. These working-class women, while not party to Friedan's work specifically, were no doubt influenced by its societal ramifications, like increasing consciousness about many women's dissatisfaction with domestic work.

While understanding the types of ideas and responses these two oft-called transformative books inspired, they were not the direct push for the housewife activism I plan to discuss. Despite their influences, *Silent Spring* and *The Feminine Mystique* did not directly compel prominent working-class housewife activists to action, at least consciously. Rather, I argue they set the stage for the housewife activism movement of

³⁶ Rotskoff, Lori E. "Home-Grown Radical or Home-Bound Housewife? Rethinking the Origins of 1960s Feminism through the Life and Work of Betty Friedan." *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 1 (March 1, 2000): 120–127: 120.

³⁷ Horowitz, Daniel. *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1998. Print: 197.

the 1970s and 1980s, demonstrating a shifting paradigm for domestic relationships and environmental concern that bred the atmosphere necessary for such activism to succeed and receive recognition within the media and the American political landscape of the time. While aspects of both the environmental and feminist movements were present in the campaign of anti-toxics housewife activism I discuss, these women cannot be reduced to gaining inspiration from books. During this time “an emergent ‘environmentalist’ agenda, centered around bodily and domestic threats like pesticides and pollution, became an outlet for feminist impulses that had remained marginal in the conservation movement and other predecessors.”³⁸ These blue-collar homemakers seized their own agency outside of the domestic sphere with a battle for equal health and living opportunities in their campaigns against toxics in their communities.

Defining “Housewife Activism”

In order to understand fully the formation and contributions of this activist movement, which historians and politicians have labeled “housewife activism,” it is imperative to explain what it means to be a “housewife” in this context. Because the term housewife is so broad, and uses such explicitly gendered language, we must explore what the term can mean and how I will employ it in the context of this thesis.

Historically, housewives have been categorized by their often-undervalued work in the home and the separation of private and public spheres is often credited with the subjugation of women and misrepresentation of their labor.³⁹ They have existed within the structure of the separate public and private spheres, working in the home of the nuclear family. However, as so-called housewife activists “gain support [...] both the activists themselves and the community at large usually redefine their activism as work appropriate for mothers, thereby moving it conceptually into a normatively female

³⁸ Sellers, C. "Body, Place and the State: The Makings of an "Environmentalism" Imaginary in the Post-World War II U.S." *Radical History Review* 1999.74 (1999): 31-64. *Duke Journals*. Duke University. Web: 50.

³⁹ Boydston, Jeanne. "To Earn Her Daily Bread." *Unequal Sisters: An Inclusive Reader in U.S. Women's History*. By Vicki Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois. New York: Routledge, 2008. 118-29. Print: 120.

domain.”⁴⁰ Though not all “housewife activists” I will discuss work strictly within the home, they all proactively adopt and except the housewife categorization as part of their identity or activist methods. These women, though at first finding their place at home, increasingly move out from this sphere into their activist work, thus exhibiting their roles as housewife activists. As Ottinger explains in the 1970s, “it would be a mistake to think of us today only in terms of our traditional roles as housewife and mother,”⁴¹ because these women have adopted activist as another aspect of their identity. In anti-toxics campaigns, “several studies of women’s anti-toxics activism claim that women who have been labeled ‘hysterical housewives’ respond by turning the label around to suit their purposes.”⁴²

In female grassroots activist movements, the woman shaping the protest and the structure and organization of the movement have chosen to evoke aspects of their socially constructed “identities” above other aspects of these identities. For instance, in many African-American female protests, these women choose to frame an activism that focuses on racial, above gender contexts. The work of these women is often rooted more in influences of the civil rights movement than the feminist movement. In a similar way, in this thesis I will focus on women who chose to accentuate their status as housewives, rather than another part of their identity. Because “when women appear in public they are seen as women or mothers first and as citizens or activists second,”⁴³ these women strategically accepted and projected this image onto their grassroots campaigns in order to frame their environmental fight with a familial orientation and a dialogue focusing on care and children in terms of health. I plan to concentrate on women activists who openly accept and adopt the term housewife as part of their identity, whether for activist purposes or for other motives. A mother who is an activist is not necessarily a “housewife activist” within this terminology. Rather, a woman must select to project this image as a part of her activist agenda.

⁴⁰ ““Making a Big Stink”: Women's Work, Women's Relationships, and Toxic Waste Activism.”: 160.

⁴¹ Ottinger: 11.

⁴² MacGregor: 189.

⁴³ Ibid. 188.

The Radicalization of Housewife Activists

Initially, housewife activism was grounded in “civic mothering,” as white middle-class women stepped out of the boundaries of their groomed lawns of the fifties and sixties and into the streets to demand cleaner and safer common resources for their families and neighborhoods. Rightly, “journalists in the mid-1960s began to point to women’s activism as a model for a new kind of conservation.”⁴⁴ These women subverted the traditional leader base of the environmental movement as privileged white men, if only in gender. Tactics used by these housewives included the organization of community groups, petitions, letters to politicians and other typical community activist mechanisms to gain support.

Even among these women, roles as mothers were imperative to activist techniques. For example, “bourgeois women’s clubs played an integral role in the early battle against smoke pollution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they too justified their activism through maternalism.”⁴⁵ These women saw their work in the environmental sphere as another type of mothering, for their own children but also for those in the lower classes who were breathing the same contaminated air but had less of an influence and voice. At this point in history, upper-class women did not view lower classes as knowing what was best for them, instead assuming they were privileged in order to care for others who could not do so for themselves. Additional examples of upper-class female environmentalist movements include the fight against smog in Los Angeles and “The League of Women Voters [who] played a vital role in the battle against water pollution.”⁴⁶

Later on, as environmental justice and toxics became more central to housewife movements, lower-class homemakers spearheaded their own community movements at the grassroots level. As Celene Krauss explains, “Calling themselves the ‘new environmental movement,’ these grass-roots protesters bear little resemblance to the more middle-class activists who are involved in environmental organizations.”⁴⁷ Lower-class housewives rarely have the privilege of an extended network connected to wealthy

⁴⁴ Rome: 537.

⁴⁵ Blum: 125.

⁴⁶ Rome: 535.

⁴⁷ Krauss: 107.

taxpayers or government paper-pushers, instead relying on innovative and borrowed techniques to create media attention and accountability within a governmental structure they once believed would protect their home, family and livelihoods without question.

To incur more media attention, these housewives progressively radicalized their causes, as they became more disillusioned with government and more desperate to protect the health of their community. These women “embraced their traditional role as women, but redefine[d] it in a variety of creative ways to shore up their authority as environmentalists, frequently borrowing tactics such as political theater and other innovative protest methods used effectively by the student and anti-war movements.”⁴⁸ Here, we can further crystallize the impacts of the radical environmental and feminist movements on housewife activism, as attention-grabbing gestures from radical movements became increasingly important in anti-toxic community campaigns. For instance, Penny Newman, a leader at the Stringfellow site which will be explored later, utilized “boycotts, guerrilla theater (protesters dressed in Styrofoam suits), hit-and-run tactics (hundreds of used clamshells left on countertops or mailed to McDonald’s owner Joan Krok)”⁴⁹ among other techniques in a campaign against waste at McDonald’s that she undertook after she engaged in activism in her own community. Another mother dealing with toxic exposure in California set up a tent city as a demonstration when the Environmental Protection Agency would not pay for residents of her unincorporated town to be relocated.⁵⁰ These techniques demonstrate an increasingly radical sensibility about housewife environmental activists, one not typically associated with classic stereotypes of the American homemaker and not utilized by earlier middle-class housewives who had easier access to influential policy makers.

This radicalization undercuts a transformative experience housewife activists cite as an aspect of their journey from homemaker to activist. Though the two are not

⁴⁸ Unger: 154.

⁴⁹ Gottlieb, Robert. *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*. Washington, D.C.: Island, 1993. Print: 163.

⁵⁰ Schoch, Deborah. “Residents’ Distrust Builds Over Extent of DDT Threat : Pollution: Word of 1980s Settlement Raises Suspicion. Neighbors Angry Despite Partial Cleanup Near Torrance.” *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1994.http://articles.latimes.com/1994-05-02/news/mn-52984_1_neighborhood-cleanup: 3.

mutually exclusive, in these movements, women who begin organizing in their community are likely to continue their involvement in environmental justice work in some respect, even if they express their desire to do otherwise. As Ferguson and Brown note, “Women toxic waste activists change their relationships to their known world—their families and communities and the corporate and political institutions that guide them—and, in the process, transform themselves as knowers.”⁵¹ While women who participated in these movements often cited their fear at initially joining the campaign, they almost always expressed a feeling of empowerment or changed sense of self, though not always expressed in a positive light, through their engagement with toxic waste activism. A theme among these women as they transitioned from their initial self-proclaimed identity of housewife to a more outspoken version of themselves is their ability to find “in their motherhood the tools and inspiration to fight for radical change”⁵² with an increasingly outspokenly angry outlook on the need for environmental health measures in their underserved communities and many like it throughout the country.

The Anti-toxics Movement

Across the United States, aging toxic waste dumps, hydrofracking sites and budding industrial centers are increasing the amount of toxic waste in all areas of the atmosphere. The implications of toxic waste came to the widespread attention of the American public in the 1970s, after Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*. According to historian Christopher Sellers, “it was Carson’s anti-industrial and global elaboration of an environmental imaginary, centered around a vulnerable human body, which helped to develop a more grassroots environmentalism”⁵³ centered on environmental health issues. *Silent Spring*, in addition to several prominent toxic disasters, allowed for increasing public recognition of the dangers surrounding toxic waste. In the anti-toxics movement, Love Canal, a toxic waste dump in Niagara Falls, NY, has become a poster child for communities who have experienced similar plights from chemical manufacture, dumping

⁵¹ ““Making a Big Stink”: Women's Work, Women's Relationships, and Toxic Waste Activism.”: 169.

⁵² Jetter et al.: 18.

⁵³ Sellers: 50.

or industry and were left largely to their own devices to mobilize governmental bodies to clean up industrial waste. Toxic waste has been shown to cause increased levels of certain types of cancers, birth defects and other reproductive difficulties, asthma and additional serious health implications. Decision-making for infrastructure and cleanup in toxically contaminated communities is dependent on several factors, including the relevance to nearby communities in terms of health and economic effects and the scope and rapidity of the issue receiving widespread recognition, as sites with larger recognition are more likely to be abated.⁵⁴ In light of this paper, several themes within the anti-toxic movement, as well as important legislation relating to chemical regulation, are necessary to frame the issue confronted by working-class housewife activists.

First, in the early 1970s, two pieces of important toxics-related legislation passed: the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act and the Toxic Substances Control Act.⁵⁵ A decade later, another heartening piece of legislation passed, the 1980 Comprehensive Emergency Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, which included Superfund legislation—setting aside federal funds for chemical waste sites as well as a framework to attribute blame to private corporations.⁵⁶ Little regulation existed for toxic dumping before the 1970s, leading to a surge of toxic disasters in the later part of the decade. Love Canal and other environmental disasters made toxic waste cleanup a governmental priority and allowed for the creation of the Superfund, which in turn allowed for the cleanup of sites like the Stringfellow Acid Pits. The legislation included stipulations for taxing industry to increase the fund, litigating against those who had caused toxic contamination and setting aside a federal “superfund,” originally set at \$1.3 billion, to pay for abatement efforts.⁵⁷ Superfund was by no means a panacea for chemical waste contamination sites, especially since Love Canal and residents across the country could

⁵⁴ O’Brien, Robert M., Michael Clarke, and Sheldon Kamieniecki. “Open and Closed Systems of Decision Making: The Case of Toxic Waste Management.” *Public Administration Review* 44, no. 4 (July 1, 1984): 334–340. doi:10.2307/976079: 335.

⁵⁵ Gottlieb: 185, 186.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 188.

⁵⁷ Barnett, H. C. “Crimes Against the Environment: Superfund Enforcement at Last.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 525.1 (1993): 119–33. Print: 121.

not reverse the continuing health problems they faced with a wave of the government's pen, and the legislation was hampered by Environmental Protection Agency implementation and perjury scandals throughout the Reagan era. Implementation is one of the most difficult aspects of cleaning declared superfund sites, as varying opinions of industry, environmentalists and community members demonstrate the "continuous tension between economic necessity and environmental quality" involved in toxic waste cleanup.⁵⁸ Also, "[c]ost overruns are common at federal Superfund cleanup sites throughout the nation, because initial estimates are often based on incomplete knowledge of the extent of the contamination."⁵⁹ Once a Superfund site has been declared, increasingly extensive testing can reveal the true magnitude of contamination, which residents have often understood much before it receives recognition. As of September 27, 2013 the United States had 1,316 official Superfund sites.⁶⁰

The toxic waste activism movement is closely tied to the environmental justice movement, whereby activists recognize and fight against the recurring effects of the construction of hazardous waste sites in poor communities or communities with large populations of color. Phenomena like "ethnic succession,"⁶¹ as well, allow privileged residents to move out of areas with hazardous contamination, lowering housing costs and forcing lower-income groups and groups of color to live in these hazardous areas. Toxic waste sites are overwhelmingly located or found in areas applicable to environmental justice. Since the 1950s and 1960s, Sellers argues environmentalism has moved towards "flexible adaptation across lines of class, gender and even race or ethnicity, though in quite different, often contrary ways,"⁶² which became more crystallized in the environmental justice movement of the 1990s. Environmental justice sees environmental

⁵⁸ Barnett: 120.

⁵⁹ Jacobs, Paul. "Despite Gains, Problems Plague Governor's Toxic Waste Program." *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 1985. http://articles.latimes.com/1985-12-01/news/mn-5526_1_hazardous-waste.

⁶⁰ "Proposed National Priorities List (NPL) Sites - by State | National Priorities List (NPL) | US EPA." Accessed October 16, 2013. <http://www.epa.gov/superfund/sites/query/queryhtm/nplfin.htm#MN>.

⁶¹ Pulido, Laura. "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90.1 (2000): 12-40. Print: 14.

⁶² Sellers: 34, 35.

contamination as a health and welfare issue whereby the body is seen “as itself environmentally threatened, alongside birds or other wildlife or forests or land.”⁶³ Thus, toxic waste activism is tied to environmental justice because of the location of these sites as well as the extreme impacts of toxic wastes on the human body. Additionally, because those groups most often affected by toxic waste and environmental injustice are those with less sway and voice in the United States political climate, these activist groups tend to be grassroots and community-based, as citizens use self-managed tools to gain attention for their movement. According to Brown and Ferguson, “Toxic waste activism frequently takes the form of popular epidemiology [...] whereby laypeople gather scientific data and also marshal the knowledge and resources of experts to understand the epidemiology of disease.”⁶⁴ One cannot consider toxic waste activism without also discussing environmental justice, since the two are invariably intertwined.

The number of currently recognized Superfund sites, as well as continuing citizen movements against toxics in their communities indicates the still-relevant implications of understanding the history of the anti-toxics movement in modern day. Cases of communities plagued by toxics from a variety of industries continue today, with often slow regulation by the EPA and little governmental and media attention. Current issues relating to toxicity include hydrofracking, which has caused chemical contamination of groundwater in several communities, like Dimock, PA where tap water is flammable but the EPA has not recognized the connection between hydrofracking and contamination.⁶⁵ Additionally, the potentially impending Keystone XL pipeline could contribute to similar types of contamination in transporting oil across the United States through environmentally sensitive regions, especially in Nebraska.⁶⁶ Other communities that have received absolutely no recognition indubitably exist, obviating the need for community-based action to fight toxic contamination and subsequent health effects. Currently, the EPA estimates that one in four Americans lives within three miles of a toxic waste site,

⁶³ Sellers: 33.

⁶⁴ “‘Making A Big Stink’: Women’s Work, Women’s Relationships, and Toxic Waste Activism”: 147.

⁶⁵ “Marcellus Shale Links: EPA Says Well Water in Dimock, Pa., Is Safe to Drink.” *The Post-Standard*. Associated Press. Web.

⁶⁶ Broder, John M. “Governor of Nebraska Backs Route for Pipeline.” *The New York Times* 22 Jan. 2013: A11. *The New York Times*. Web.

indicating the severity of this issue within the country's political and environmental climate.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ "ASCE | 2013 Report Card for America's Infrastructure | Hazardous Waste: Overview.." <http://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/a/#p/hazardous-waste/overview>.

Chapter 2. Love Canal

The Neighborhood

Love Canal in the late 1970's was an idyllic blue-collar district downstream of Niagara Falls, a family-friendly neighborhood with elementary schools, playgrounds and churches. The residents believed they were living the American Dream they had idealized while growing up. However, slowly in the years leading up to the summer of 1978, those living in the neighborhood realized they had been living a toxically tainted version of the American Dream they coveted, atop of and adjacent to a former toxic dumpsite. The next years found them in a legal and political battle to obtain the resources to extricate themselves from the place they had called home. Love Canal was the first toxically contaminated community to garner widespread media attention in the United States, shaking previously held American understandings of safety in suburbia.

When examining the occurrences at Love Canal, still one of the most well-known examples of toxic waste contamination in American history, I will focus on the role that self-proclaimed housewife activists played in the Love Canal saga and situate their participation within the greater context of citizen activism in the area, as well as within the movement of working-class housewife activists fighting toxic contamination in their communities throughout the country. Love Canal is reflective of historic currents in the country's political landscape: shedding light on the complex combination of feminism, environmentalism, radicalism and suburbia that forms the core of working-class housewife activism. Women working on Love Canal contamination form a good case study to understand housewife activism because of their use of maternal politics as well as radical protest strategies adopted from other movements and their radical push for change concerning toxics within American society. The placement of these homes atop the canal also indicates the common theme of locating toxic dumpsites near marginalized communities, like the working-class residents who found a home at Love Canal. Activism surrounding this site demonstrates the move towards environmental justice occurring throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

As the hasty summary of Love Canal is often told, Lois Gibbs started out as a housewife, caring for her two young children and leading a happy and normal life with her chemical-industry worker husband, Harry. While Gibbs, as a self-named housewife

and an increasingly radical environmental activist, along with her organization the Love Canal Homeowner's Association, will be the focus for the purposes of this thesis' analysis, it is imperative to additionally recognize the "standard version of the Love Canal story also omits the complications of race, gender, and class in grassroots activism."⁶⁸ The housewife activist blue-collar group was not the sole organization advocating for clean-up in the area. They did, however, gain the most attention and potentially political action as well based off of this attention. In assessing the significance of housewife activism at Love Canal it is necessary to examine the role of these housewife activists within the greater context of some upper-class residents (who had the privilege of mobility) and African-American renters in the area (who did not have the privilege of mobility)—because lack of media attention for these groups indicates the success of working-class housewife activist movements in capturing public imagination and pressuring political change. Factions within the Love Canal community maintained slightly different direct goals in fighting the toxic waste contamination, but the blue-collar housewife activist group I focus on was the most successful and vocal.

This thesis will elucidate why housewife activism came about and why and for what reasons it was successful in the area and in similar communities. While the working-class group did not have the privilege of adequate funds to vacate the area, they were secure in their white, mainstream privilege to garner attention for the cause and adopt the innocuous façade of motherhood as an activist tool. To advance their campaign, the "working-class group, desperate to escape the area, resorted to more radical tactics over time."⁶⁹ The use of a nurturing framework, as well as increasingly radical strategies combined to create an emotional portrait of a dangerous issue in the news.

The "Model City" Dump

Love Canal was dug in the early 1890's "with much fanfare [...] by a flamboyant entrepreneur named William T. Love, who wanted to construct an industrial city with ready access to water power and major markets" [sic]. Love's development was to be called "Model City" and residents would be provided with free power due to the copious

⁶⁸ Blum: 2.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 5.

electricity provided by the falls and the newly constructed canal.⁷⁰ Despite Love's ambitions, the economic depression of the mid 1890's caused investors to withdraw their support and Love eventually ran out of funding, mid-project. The Canal, estimated to be sixty feet wide, ten feet deep and three thousand feet long, was never fully completed, going unused for quite some time. Though Love Canal was not successful itself, the Niagara Falls region still provided large amounts of electricity necessary for chemical companies to prosper, driving industrial development throughout the area, in turn providing employment and fueling the economy.



Aerial View of Love Canal and Southern Niagara Falls, 1965. Courtesy, University Archives Love Canal Images: Spectrum Photograph Collection, State University of New York at Buffalo

⁷⁰ Levine, Adeline Gordon. *Love Canal: Science, Politics, and People*. Lexington, MA: Lexington, 1982. Print: 9.

Hooker Chemical began production in the Niagara Falls area in 1905, drawn by the aforementioned abundance of power.⁷¹ Hooker originally manufactured highly toxic chemicals like chlorine, but diversified into new markets as new chemicals became essential in the American marketplace. In 1978, the year Love Canal made national headlines; Hooker employed 18,000 people and had net sales of \$1.7 billion,⁷² though still just a small portion of its parent company Occidental Petroleum Corporation's business. Throughout the first half of the 20th century Hooker maintained an important foothold in the Niagara Falls region, locating their largest plant in the area as well as a \$17 million⁷³ headquarters in the city.⁷⁴ As Niagara Falls developed, Hooker Chemical was closely tied to the growth of its economy and the employment of many of its citizens.

In 1942 the 16-acre tract was sold to Hooker, who had secured permission from the Niagara Power and Development Company to dump industrial waste. Chemical disposal continued in the canal until 1953.⁷⁵ Hooker dumped throughout the area but the most devastating site was at Love Canal. "A drinking water system containing only an ounce of dioxin can kill millions of people; Hooker Chemical's three toxic-waste dumps in the Niagara Falls area contained more than two thousand pounds."⁷⁶ Additionally, "according to an internal report, Hooker Chemical had often released toxic gases, mercury, and chlorine into the air and dumped toxic pesticides into city sewers."⁷⁷ Hooker's dumping was not regulated and their status in the Niagara Falls economy gave the company leeway in dumping practices. Though Hooker Chemical and Plastics Corporation was the main dumper, the city of Niagara Falls also contributed garbage to the canal and the US Army is fabled to have disposed of chemical warfare materials from the Manhattan project in the same location, though they have never admitted to such

⁷¹ Levine: 9.

⁷² Ibid. 9.

⁷³ Brown, Michael H. "Love Canal and the Poisoning of America." *The Atlantic* Dec. 1979: 33-47. *The Atlantic Monthly*. Web.

⁷⁴ McFadden, Robert. "N.Y. Sets Loan for Hooker Office in Niagara Falls." *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* 24 Jan. 1980: 6F. Print.

⁷⁵ Gibbs, Lois Marie. *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*. Washington: Island, 2011. Print: 21.

⁷⁶ Breton, Mary Jo. *Women Pioneers for the Environment*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1998. Print: 117.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 117.

disposal. From 1952 to 1953 Hooker filled the canal after the Niagara Falls Board of Education expressed interest in the land. When the canal was being filled, a reporter detailed the danger the canal presented: “Workers would run screaming into [longtime resident Karen Shroeder’s] yard when some of the toxic chemicals they were dumping would spill on their skin or clothes. She remembers her mother washing them down with a garden hose until first aid could arrive.”⁷⁸

The board won the land at a steal, for only \$1 and an agreement that Hooker would never be held liable for any harm the site may inflict on those who used it after dumping occurred.⁷⁹ The deed to the School Board was just one of several initial signs that the area was unsafe. Signed April 28, 1953, the deed stated:

Prior to the delivery of this instrument of conveyance, the grantee herein has been advised by the grantor that the premises above described have been filled, in whole or in part, to the present grade level thereof with waste products resulting from the manufacturing of chemicals by the grantor at its plant in the City of Niagara Falls, New York, and the grantee assumes all risk and liability incident to the use thereof. It is, therefore, understood and agreed that, as a part of the consideration ... and as a condition thereof, no claim, suit, action or demand of any nature whatsoever shall ever be made ... against [Hooker] ... for injury to person or persons, including death resulting therefrom, or loss of or damage to property caused by, or in connection with or by reason of the presence of said industrial wastes.⁸⁰

Just two years after this covert transaction, an elementary school to serve the Love Canal community opened on the corner of the old canal dumping ground, with a playground right on top of the covered dump. During the initial stages of the school’s construction, the contractor discovered some chemical residues and suggested the school board select a safer and more structurally sound site. In response, the board moved the school construction 85 feet north of their original plan.⁸¹ While some existing homes were located near the canal during Hooker’s dumping use and its subsequent filling,

⁷⁸ Levine: 11.

⁷⁹ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 22.

⁸⁰ Deed of Sale from Hooker Electrochemical Company to the Board of Education of the School District of the City of Niagara Falls, New York, 28 April 1953 (filed 6 July, 1953), Niagara County, New York, Deed Book 1106, page 467. Ranchot Runals Cohen Taylor and Rickert Counselors at Law, Niagara Falls, New York.

⁸¹ Levine: 12.

increased residential construction began adjacent to the area around the same time as school construction. Similar to the elementary school building, home erection paid little mind to the potential ramifications of the buried chemicals and “cut channels through the supposedly impermeable clay walls lining the hidden canal.”⁸² These cuts through the actual walls of the canal likely led to increased incidence of chemical leaching within the community, contaminating groundwater. In total, Hooker Chemical has admitted to dumping about 21,800 tons of toxic chemicals in the canal, though this quantity accounts for much less than was dumped in total.



99th Street Elementary School Playground Seen from Wheatfield Ave, 1978. Courtesy, University Archives
Love Canal Images: Penelope D. Ploughman Love Canal Collection, State University of New York at Buffalo

A Toxic Start

Harry and Lois Gibbs moved in to Niagara Falls’ Love Canal neighborhood when they were in their early 20s, excited by attaining their dream house with a metaphorical white-picket fence. Gibbs grew up one of six children; her father was a bricklayer, and her childhood was a portrait of the stereotypical American working-class

⁸² Levine: 13.

lifestyle. As is indicated by the Gibbs family, Love Canal was a haven for growing blue-collar families and “most of the neighborhood’s working-class population moved in during the 1960s and 1970s, taking advantage of increasingly available government-backed and –sponsored housing loans.”⁸³ Because of the small amount of time many families had lived in the area, most were unaware of the area’s historic chemical contamination. As Gibbs explains herself, “[w]hen I first moved to the Love Canal neighborhood in Niagara Falls, New York, the only thing it symbolized was 1970s suburbia”⁸⁴—a comforting normalcy to the working-class families that settled down and began building their families there and an ironic juxtaposition to the toxic archetype Love Canal now represents.

Moving into her home was the start of Gibbs’ American dream and at first she thought the somewhat unpleasant smells in the air were actually indicative of the success of her budding family. She writes, “When you walked out the door in the morning and smelled the chemicals, you thought: ‘Mmmm. Good economy.’ [...] As long as you smelled the chemicals you knew you could pay the mortgage.”⁸⁵ This type of attitude towards economic progress and the working-class lifestyle illuminate a common theme in toxic-dump communities. Often having large segments of the population employed in the prevailing industry in the area, communities may not initially view chemicals as dangerous or detrimental to their neighborhoods. Rather, they are likely to see them as a boon to the economy and thus all who live nearby. Journalist Michael Brown enumerates, “To an economically depressed area, [Hooker] provided desperately needed employment—as many as 3000 blue-collar jobs in the general vicinity, at certain periods—and a substantial number of tax dollars.”⁸⁶ The dominance of this jobs-above-all-else ideology would later become a conflict when Gibbs began fighting for environmental justice in Love Canal, as many in the community saw her efforts as anti-capitalist opposition to the chemical industry that was the backbone of the community’s economy.

⁸³ Blum: 23.

⁸⁴ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 1.

⁸⁵ Jetter et al.: 28.

⁸⁶ “Love Canal and the Poisoning of America.”

Increasing realizations about the danger pervading the community came when local *Niagara Gazette* journalist Michael H. Brown began to piece together the rare and reoccurring health problems of Love Canal residents. Through research, citizen interviews and home visits, Brown reasoned that the chemicals veiled under a thin layer of ash and dirt had been seeping into backyards, basements and contaminating the very air people around the canal were breathing. Brown explained, “[t]hat it involved chemicals, industrial chemicals, was not particularly significant to them [at first]. All their lives, all of everyone’s life in the city, malodorous fumes had been a normal ingredient of the ambient air.”⁸⁷ Longtime residents of the Love Canal neighborhood were accustomed to the nuisance of the seemingly short lives of their sump pumps and the unidentified black substances seeping through the concrete blocks of their basement walls. Many were unaware other residents and neighbors had serious illnesses similar to those afflicting their own families. Later, citizens did take notice when Brown synthesized and publicized the abnormal patterns of health effects caused by what to them had long been a part of Love Canal life.

High rainfall in the mid through late 1970s caused ground saturation; rusting chemical drums and pushing them to the surface of the canal, specifically under the elementary school’s playground. As time went on, metal barrels containing toxic chemicals began to rust, allowing the contents to leak to the surface. In a 1979 *Atlantic* article, after Love Canal had received national publicity, Brown summarized an early sign of the problems: a neighbor’s pool was pushed out of the ground, then dug out to be replaced with a concrete version. But, the new pool was unable to be installed, “for the gaping excavation immediately filled with what Karen [a Love Canal resident] called ‘chemical water,’ rancid liquids of yellow and orchid and blue.”⁸⁸ What once was a thriving backyard became painted with the dangerous hues of Hooker’s leftovers as chemicals leached closer to topsoil. This anecdote is indicative of the types of stories Love Canal residents began to weave together as they realized their families were not the only ones with birth defects, miscarriages and bizarre and rare diseases among their

⁸⁷ "Love Canal and the Poisoning of America."

⁸⁸ Ibid.

young children. When Love Canal became an immediate threat in the mid and late 1970s, 1,000 families lived near the dumpsite.⁸⁹

From certain reports and comments, it is clear to see that the School Board as well as the city of Niagara Falls was aware of the probable detrimental effects of the toxic chemicals lying under the Love Canal neighborhood. As explained above, the School Board received repeated warnings about the chemicals, first from Hooker (who were negligible in their own right, but did wash their hands of legal ramifications) and the school building's contractor, who encouraged the board to move the planned site for the elementary school. Still, the school board refused to heed warnings and went ahead with the planned development. In 1976 the Niagara Falls Superintendent sent a message to parents requesting they tell their children to stay on the sidewalks around the site, rather than stepping on the ground.⁹⁰ This statement foreshadowed a comment to Lois Gibbs in June of 1978 by Dr. Nicholas Vianna, who conducted environmental and health studies at the site, after Gibbs asked how residents could possibly restrict their children's' play activities, "He just said: 'You are their mother. You can limit the time they play on the canal.' I wondered if he had any children."⁹¹ Discussions between the city of Niagara Falls, Hooker Chemical and the New York State Department of Health in 1976 also revealed the city's concern over the site, as DOH and Hooker assured William Friedman, regional director of the Department of Environmental Conservation of New York, that they would handle the problem jointly.⁹² Then, in the early spring of 1978, just before Gibbs began to mobilize Love Canal residents, the state health department's director of laboratory sciences Dr. David Axelrod told health commissioner Robert Whalen that soil samples taken from the site showed the likelihood of causing serious health problems among those living nearby.⁹³ Still, government planners hesitated at the inclusion of community decision-making or information, instead opting to conduct their own tests and studies in the upcoming months.

⁸⁹ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement: 21.*

⁹⁰ Levine: 15.

⁹¹ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement: 38.*

⁹² Levine 16.

⁹³ Ibid. 20.



Children playing in backyard adjacent to rising toxic waste, 1978. Courtesy, University Archives Love Canal Images: Ecumenical Task Force of the Niagara Frontier Records, State University of New York at Buffalo

As Gibbs writes, “If you drove down my street *before Love Canal* [...] you might have thought it looked like a typical American small town that you would see in a TV movie.”⁹⁴ The Love Canal saga *was* in fact produced as a TV movie later, with Gibbs as the heroine. But, Gibbs’ statement, by emphasizing the change from before to after Love Canal, demonstrates how a sleepy quintessentially American town was turned into a battleground for environmental health and toxic standards, with housewife activists taking center stage in the national limelight. As toxic chemicals were seeping into the domestic atmospheres of Love Canal’s housewives, these housewives were stepping

⁹⁴ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement: 25.*

outside of the private sphere and politicizing their roles as mothers to gain recognition and enact lasting change for those living in the neighborhood.

When describing her Love Canal realizations, Gibbs consistently focuses on her children's health issues and those of other children in the community. From a young age her son, the oldest of her two children, was sickly and suffered from rare maladies like seizures and dry skin conditions. He was diagnosed with epilepsy and became even sicker when he started attending school. Gibbs' daughter, born in Love Canal, developed a blood disorder, which had her platelet count at 1,000 when the normal level is about 250,000 to 450,000.⁹⁵ Her daughter's blood refused to clot and she would become bruised or bleed uncontrollably at the slightest touch. Medical bills began to run high for the family, adding to the taxing monthly sum of their mortgage and everyday cost of living on her husband's modest \$10,000 a year (a little over \$45,000 by current standards) chemical worker salary. Gibbs was beside herself with her children's illnesses, especially since she explains, "For many years I had honestly taken pride in being the best mom on the block."⁹⁶ When Gibbs read Brown's articles and began speculating about the connections between her children's illnesses and the chemicals in the canal, she realized "nobody else was going to protect my baby but me."⁹⁷ This type of language, referring to her children as "baby" and herself as "the best mom" evokes the caring imagery Gibbs consciously associates with her cause. By carefully cultivating this imagery, Gibbs and other housewife activists foster a unique type of activist movement that invokes maternalism as housewives politicize their traditionally domestic roles.

"You are their mother"⁹⁸: Becoming a Housewife Activist

Gibbs' first disillusionment with government and political processes came when she attempted to move her son from his school, which she believed was causing his illnesses. She writes: "[W]hen I found out the 99th Street School was indeed on top of it [the canal], I was alarmed. My son attended that school. He was in kindergarten that

⁹⁵ Jetter et al.: 29, 30.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 32.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 32.

⁹⁸ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 38.

year”⁹⁹ and she declares “I wasn’t going to send my child to a place that was poisoned.”¹⁰⁰ The mother tried to reason with the school board and move her son, Michael, to another school in the area, but administrators refused to permit her request unless she acquired two separate doctor notes explicitly stating the chemicals in the canal were definitely causing her son’s illnesses. Though the doctors Gibbs visited believed it was possible the chemicals under the school negatively affected her son, she was not able to get a doctor’s note to say there was a definite connection because of liability issues. Thus, Gibbs was unable to switch Michael to another school and with only her husband working, and the family living on a small budget that was already stretched thin, sending her son to private school was out of the question. This type of dilemma categorizes working-class housewife activism, as many women are drawn to community movements because they feel they are left with little option. Earlier generations of housewife activism were focused more on improving quality of life in terms of the environment. Working-class housewives see their anti-toxics activism as a matter of life or death.

Gibbs felt out of options, and she was worried Michael’s health might deteriorate further if he remained at the 99th Street School. Deciding some families might have similar issues, she planned to talk to other parents: “I decided to go door-to-door to see if the other parents in the neighborhood felt the same way. That way, maybe something could be done. At the time, though, I didn’t really think of this as ‘organizing’.”¹⁰¹ Here, Gibbs downplays her decision-making skills in asserting her activism. She emphasizes that she went to talk to other parents, who potentially had similar concerns about their children, clearing defining the issue as one of the home and the private sphere. Gibbs denies that this action had premeditation based in activist principles like “organizing.” However, Gibbs’ attempt at connecting with other parents was an important step in developing her brand of housewife activism. Though she saw the chemical contamination as an issue related to her children and home, discussing this problem with other parents demonstrated its importance as a *community* issue, in the public sphere. Thus, Gibbs began the transition of her traditionally constructed role of mother and housewife to the

⁹⁹ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 27.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 29.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 29.

public sphere. Instead of shedding her identity as a mother and caretaker, Gibbs publicized and politicized it within the public eye, utilizing a historic form of housewife activism, that was neither part of the private domestic sphere or the public sphere, in a new way. Because Gibbs knew where the dump was actually located, “It seemed like a good idea to start near the school, to talk to the mothers nearest it.”¹⁰² Again, Gibbs emphasizes her efforts to talk to mothers specifically. Gibbs keeps the reader’s attention focused on the idea of mothers concerned with their children and she consciously appeals to the caring archetype that is often associated with women to create a possible personal connection to the Love Canal story.

In her several books and copious interviews Gibbs is careful to explain how difficult it was for her to gain the confidence to actually knock on her first door. This threshold moment was when Gibbs became an activist. As soon as her hand made contact with her first door, she was involved in “organizing,” whether she initially viewed it in that way or not. Gibbs consistently focuses on her ascension to heading an organization largely composed of Love Canal housewives with confusion and self-deprecation. This is evidenced when Gibbs discusses her increasing comfort with talking to residents in their own homes. At first Gibbs could barely knock on a door, but she soon enjoys visiting her neighbors and bonding over concerns about the chemical contamination, but she is still uncomfortable when her neighbors ask her technical questions. Despite her organizing, Gibbs does not see herself as an expert, rather a housewife concerned with her community’s property values and health issues. Downplaying her particular and deep knowledge of the Love Canal movement while clearly exhibiting some form of expertise was a key tool Gibbs used in fighting for change in the community. She recalls one meeting where she said, “‘Excuse me, [...] I’m just a dumb housewife, I’m not an expert. [...] I’m just going to use a little common sense’.”¹⁰³ Though Gibbs may not be considered an expert in scientific and technical terms, by framing the issue as one related to motherhood and children’s health, she adopts an expertise unavailable to others. Not until Gibbs became the center and leader of the Love Canal Homeowner’s Association did she really accept her entrance into the public eye.

¹⁰² *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 30.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 50.



*Father and child with sign 'I want to live' at Love Canal protest, 1978. Courtesy, University Archives
Love Canal Images: Ecumenical Task Force of the Niagara Frontier Records, State University of New
York at Buffalo*

Building a Movement

Gibbs' housewife activist trajectory has become a symbolic model for female activists' rise to prominence and power. In simple terms, Gibbs read Brown's articles, connected her own children's dangerous health issues to Brown's explanations of the chemical dump, and initially attempted to solve these problems internally within the system and specifically for her own family. When this was entirely unsuccessful, Gibbs decided to mobilize other parents who she thought might be experiencing similar problems. When Gibbs discovered the extent of these issues she became angered with what she saw as an unjust governmental system, especially since she was "taught to believe that if there was a problem, the government would protect you."¹⁰⁴ Increasing disillusionment with unhelpful civil servants and realization of the extent of Love Canal's issues led to increasing radicalization within Gibbs own ideology and that of her group, leading to a symbolic event that brought the campaign to a head. Gibbs and her group, the

¹⁰⁴ Jetter et al.: 28.

Love Canal Homeowner's Association, achieved many of their goals of relocation, albeit slowly. This pathway is indicative of the housewife activism archetype—a progressively more radical movement in which women begin to notice problems within their own family and are able to apply these observations to the community at large. Gibbs' activist trajectory should be examined for its intricacies and profound impacts within the anti-toxics housewife activism movement.

In Gibbs' personal interviews and writings she uses the term "housewife" to such an enormous extent that it is reasonable to surmise that she consciously describes herself in these terms and does so for activist or political reasons. For instance, when discussing her original interactions with bureaucratic and governmental figures she describes feelings of nervousness, anxiety and sometimes confusion in terms of an unknowledgeable housewife. "I was intimidated by the meeting—me, Lois Gibbs, a housewife, whose biggest decision up to then had been what color wallpaper to use in my kitchen."¹⁰⁵ In tune with historical perspectives on female tasks in the home, Gibbs devalues her domestic work by describing it in terms of petty chores, like selecting wallpaper. In this way, Gibbs demonstrates the extent of her transition from "just a housewife" to an environmental activist with much sway in her community. Gibbs' repetitive reminders of her place in the private domestic sphere serves to demonstrate her commonality with the "every woman"—by perpetuating the housewife archetype she makes environmental activism accessible to everyone, and makes her story more appealing for the widespread American audience.

As a woman who later became a prominent environmental organizer, one of Gibbs' most important jobs is mobilizing other women much like herself against toxic contamination in their own communities. Her ability to stand as a leader of women without subjugating or domineering them placed her in a unique position that continually kept the media focused on the Love Canal ordeal. Indeed, journalist Brown notes that Gibbs "proved remarkably adept at dealing with experienced politicians and at keeping the matter in the news."¹⁰⁶ Journalists look for stories that are not only newsworthy, but will be read by the public. In 1978 Love Canal was featured in news stories all over the

¹⁰⁵ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 47.

¹⁰⁶ "Love Canal and the Poisoning of America."

world in countries like Austria, nearby Canada, England, West Germany and the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁷ Because Gibbs was able to play up her everyday housewife persona, and emphasize this continually in political interactions, she was able to gain sustained media attention for the community.

Gibbs' move from a housewife working singularly for the good of her own children, to an activist caring for all children¹⁰⁸ is also indicative of a larger theme within housewife activism. When Gibbs realized the extent of illnesses in Love Canal she became determined to organize for actual change. As another female activist from a separate community summarizes, "The real issues came down to the human level. What we have seen in this community is kids die. When that happens, go for it."¹⁰⁹ After Gibbs began to understand the illnesses present at Love Canal, she was unable to turn away from the cause, cementing her development from housewife to housewife activist. Love Canal first gained national media attention in the spring of 1978. The Love Canal Homeowner's Association (LCHA) was officially founded in August 1978, with a starting membership of 500 people,¹¹⁰ mostly women. Membership was not difficult to find because as one editorial by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Dunmire explains, "Every mother in the Love Canal [was] scared to death."¹¹¹ Though Gibbs had already become the face of the Love Canal movement and had received attention for the community, this organization was able to keep Love Canal in the news. The organization quickly set up an office and established their goals: evacuation, cleaning and propping up diminishing property values.¹¹² Several community women joined Gibbs in establishing the Homeowners Association's center of operations including Debbie Cerrillo, Marie

¹⁰⁷ Francis, Mark. "Reporters Flock to Canal Crisis." *Niagara Gazette*, August 20, 1978. <http://library.buffalo.edu/specialcollections/lovecanal/documents/clippings/8-20-781.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Jetter et al.: 42.

¹⁰⁹ "Making A Big Stink": Women's Work, Women's Relationships, and Toxic Waste Activism: 150.

¹¹⁰ Breton: 120.

¹¹¹ Dunmire, Mr. Joseph, and Mrs. Joseph Dunmire. "'Every Mother Is Scared to Death'." *Niagara Gazette*, April 27, 1980. <http://library.buffalo.edu/specialcollections/lovecanal/documents/clippings/4-27-801.html>.

¹¹² *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 59, 60.

Pozniak, Barbara Quimby and Grace McCoulf and Gibbs declared that “With our own office, we set up housekeeping”¹¹³—again utilizing motherly imagery to describe the Love Canal movement.

Initial methods of the Homeowners Association were simple, because as Gibbs claims, “We were all innocent then”¹¹⁴ and the housewife organizers were not entirely cognizant of the bureaucracy they would soon confront. Women focused on door-to-door solicitation, reaching out to politicians, flyering, gaining signatures on petitions and holding public meetings¹¹⁵ where different administrative leaders answered to residents about the potential ramifications of chemical contamination. LCHA, though it hoped to incorporate interests of different groups within the community, was met with some opposition when it first began organizing. Gibbs explains, “Some of the residents were frustrated and uncooperative. They believed we were blowing the Love Canal problem all out of proportion. Just go away, lady!”¹¹⁶ Once again, Gibbs’ conscious use of the word “lady” indicates her practiced framing of the LCHA movement, and the Love Canal movement in general, in terms of womanhood. As explained above, many invested in the chemical industry were skeptical of Gibbs’ position, fragmenting community solidarity for the Love Canal crisis.

Additionally, the subversion of traditional female roles left some husbands smarting without their wives’ constant domestic presence. Gibbs says, “because of the canal crisis, the women did most of the work at the Homeowner’s Association. [...] because the women were active during the crisis, many found a new independence.”¹¹⁷ This newfound autonomy did not always sit well with housewife activists’ husbands, who at times felt threatened by their wives’ ambitions outside the home. Many men also worked in the chemical industry in the area, and saw activism as an economic threat. While some husbands were more supportive than others, “For many of the [...] families, the wives’ activism left a gaping hole in family life, forcing their husbands to step in and assume responsibility for some of the day-to-day chores they had previously left

¹¹³ Ibid. 75.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 100.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 90.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 90.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 198.

exclusively to women.”¹¹⁸ This subversion of traditional domestic roles reveals another dimension of housewife activism, whereby women do not leave aspects of their identity checked at the door to their home or the outside world, instead weaving aspects of their identities into a complex sense of self. By acting as both housewives and activists within the contexts of each separate role, women combined these two identities, often separated by society, into a new type of activism and feminine identity that shifted dominant paradigms of what homemakers could accomplish.

“A Sesame Street picnic”¹¹⁹

Members of Gibbs’ organization, and community members at large, became increasingly outspoken throughout 1978, frustrated with the slow process at which the state and federal governments were responding to the emergency they viewed in the toxic contamination. In April 1978 a state report was released that “documented that at Love Canal, between 1958 and 1975, five out of every twenty-four children had been born with defects—including deformed ears and teeth, deafness, cleft palates, and mental retardation, as well as abnormalities of the kidneys, heart, and pelvis.”¹²⁰ Reports like this, along with meetings where emotions ran high and men from the community often cried and exclaimed about the danger their pregnant wives and unborn fetuses were enduring, led to a sense of increased immediacy within the community. Blood testing in Love Canal began in June 1978,¹²¹ a disorganized maneuver in a gym auditorium that angered residents. Throughout the testing the state lost blood samples, stored others incorrectly and failed to assign a schedule for residents to have their blood drawn. These types of unsystematic action, which to residents seemed more an attempt to quell worry than actually understand toxic effects, added fuel to fire for Gibbs’ movement.

¹¹⁸ Blum: 53.

¹¹⁹ Love Canal and the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement: 181.

¹²⁰ Breton: 120.

¹²¹ Levine: 87.



Blood sample being taken for epidemiological investigation from young Love Canal resident, 1978.
Courtesy, University Archives Love Canal Images: : New York State Department of Health Collection,
State University of New York at Buffalo

Then, in the same month that Gibbs gave her organization a name, Health Commissioner Whalen declared Love Canal an emergency and recommended temporary relocation for pregnant families and those with children under two living in the inner rings of the site, though no funds were offered for relocation.¹²² This decision further framed the toxic contamination in terms of family and children, demonstrating the weight

¹²² Brown, Mike. "Evacuation of Kids Urged." *Niagara Gazette*, August 2, 1978.
<http://library.buffalo.edu/specialcollections/lovecanal/documents/clippings/8-2-781.html>.

placed on conception and reproductive difficulties experienced in the area. Gibbs explains, "I remember one mother telling a health department representative that even if the levels of chemicals were safe for her, they could not be safe for her child. She was dismissed back then as an emotional mother."¹²³ The announcement proved that administrators did understand the urgency behind mothers' pleas for their children's health. However, Whalen's announcement outraged many in the community who found the idea that the chemicals could hurt young children and fetuses but not others ludicrous. Gibbs ironically identifies with the hysterical housewife identity when she says, after the announcement left older children behind, "We were screaming. We were hysterical."¹²⁴ Many residents spoke out about their children who were two and a half years old, debating the arbitrary boundary written by Whalen's decision.

Later that August, New York State promised to purchase 237 homes on the inner ring next to the canal. This decision left 710 families behind¹²⁵ in zones declared to be safe. This was only a small victory for the community, as it left the majority of endangered citizens still in their homes and the process of actually relocating people showed to be another set of jumping through political hoops. Around this time, LCHA's disillusionment with government continued to increase. In September, the organization began its own health study, traveling door-to-door to interview residents, often spending long hours listening to the intricacies of the illnesses their neighbors were suffering from. These interviews and phone-call questionnaires later led to a mapping of illnesses in the area that was completed in February 1979. Though discounted as "housewife data,"¹²⁶ this map led Gibbs to develop her swale theory, in which she claimed leachates were traveling through the groundwater and cutting through the canal, causing abnormally high illness counts along swale areas.¹²⁷ When presented to the New York Health Department, who were working on a never-ending study themselves, the report was ill received, and as Gibbs was told, "It didn't mean anything because it was put together by a bunch of

¹²³ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 3.

¹²⁴ Jetter et al.: 35.

¹²⁵ Breton: 122.

¹²⁶ Gibbs, Lois M. "Love Canal :: Start of a Movement." *Love Canal :: Start of a Movement*. Boston University. Web.

¹²⁷ Levine: 99.

housewives with an interest in the outcome of the study.”¹²⁸ The health department’s indignant response to LCHA’s health study is indicative of media and political opinions of housewife activists. Though these women did embrace and use this terminology in order to gain emotional support for their cause, at times their opinions and expert knowledge was discounted because of these emotional tones. These women become experts, but because experts cannot be considered in the context of emotion, only academia, domestic research is often condemned—limiting direct political impact.

In October 1978 remedial construction began,¹²⁹ though most in the community were opposed to disturbing the canal before all families could be moved and heavy protest accompanied the construction. A simple fence was built around the dumping area, the school and the playground and ground was broken. This type of “remediation” without community input, or in direct opposition to expressed community concerns categorized most of Love Canal’s decision making in its first years. Based on the judgments that were made, according to sociologist Adeline Levine, “it seemed that the general ethos of the state’s efforts was to mitigate the Love Canal situation almost solely by imposing technological and other practical solutions on the area and the people, without considering people’s reactions.”¹³⁰ The opinions of the working-class inhabitants of the area were once again discounted, much like when the site first moved to the area and when new homes were put up for sale—a consistent theme in areas populated by those with little political sway due to class or other marginalization. First steps in construction were meant to halt and prevent further leaching of the chemicals into groundwater. The state dug trenches and installed tile drainage to divert leachates to these trenches, where they would be pumped out and treated.¹³¹ The multimillion-dollar construction, paid for by the city and the city board of health, also planned to cover the canal with an “impermeable”¹³² 8-foot clay cap, much like the one that had previously cracked and leaked. During construction, inner ring families were temporarily relocated but outer ring families were still stuck in the neighborhood, immobilized by their lack of

¹²⁸ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 104.

¹²⁹ Levine: 46.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 76.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 46.

¹³² Jetter et al.: 32.

funds. Consistent protests by women and children near the school as well as vandalism in the form of tacks placed on 97th and 99th streets to halt vehicles¹³³ exhibited frustrations with construction.

During these months LCHA organized increasing numbers of protests, picketing, door-to-door petitions, letter writing and phone calls to all levels of government including the White House. Lois Gibbs was mentally and emotionally exhausted with the continued yo-yoing of governmental decisions. Tensions escalated within families as well, as mothers who had previously finished domestic chores were away from their homes more and more. Gibbs said “It seemed like weeks or months since I had seen my kids. My husband was getting upset with me. I was never home; I was always somewhere else. Dinner was never on time.”¹³⁴ The mother also reflects nostalgically about missing familial activities like decorating and baking for Christmas and celebrating her children’s birthdays to the extent she had done before she became an activist. As a working-class housewife activist, Gibbs worked as a full-time mother and a full-time mouthpiece for the Love Canal cause. Her continued writing about how she sacrificed some of what she had considered her motherly duties for her activist duties indicate how her identity changed during this time, not fitting in either mold entirely.

The mothers’ activism contributed to tensions between wives and husbands throughout the Love Canal fight, as men felt less powerful with their wives’ new roles as protectors and husbands’ increased responsibilities in the home. As Blum writes, “Tempered by the inherent threat to masculine domination, many working-class white men rejected the goals of both the civil rights movement and the women’s movement [which both had a hand in Love Canal activism]. They resented women’s public role in the Love Canal crisis and pressed for a return to ‘normalcy—which meant a clean house and dinner on the table when they arrived home from work’”¹³⁵ and “For many of the [...] families, the wives’ activism left a gaping hole in family life, forcing their husbands to step in and assume responsibility for some of the day-to-day chores they had previously

¹³³ “Love Canal and the Poisoning of America.”

¹³⁴ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 60.

¹³⁵ Blum: 5, 6.

left exclusively to women.”¹³⁶ While some husbands were more supportive than others when their housewives transitioned to environmental activism in the community, the changing expectations of gender roles was omnipresent in the neighborhood. No longer were men those carrying the family’s public image outside of the home. Rather, women who had previously existed almost exclusively in private circles apart from safe housewife choices like PTA, were holding the safety of the community on their shoulders. This shift was especially important in a blue-collar community like Love Canal, where gender roles within the family tend to be more “traditional.” As Gibbs explains, “The husband in a blue-collar community is saying get your ass home and cook me dinner, it’s either me or the issue, make your choice. The woman says: how can I make a choice, you’re telling me choose between the health of my children and your fucking dinner, how do I deal with that?”¹³⁷ This comment exposes the increasing radicalization and passion felt by housewife activists working within toxics movements and the importance they placed on their movement. In swearing, Gibbs demonstrates her unwillingness to sit back and fill her domestic role quietly, instead extending her personal view of domesticity to protect her children in a new way. According to Gibbs, “the men in our community are from a culture where they are the protectors and the providers. And suddenly they were no longer protecting the families. The women were.”¹³⁸ Housewife activism, though it did not explicitly use feminist language, advanced goals of the second wave feminist movement in shifting gender roles and radicalizing women to have the empowerment to do so, especially within the context of the working-class home.

In September of 1979 an additional 300 families living outside of the inner rings were temporarily relocated because of construction-related health problems. While all of these small evacuations were considered partial victories, their temporary nature and the difficulties they presented in coordination led to anxiety within the community, about when they would be forced to move back, how they would pay for the motel if the state did not come through, and what would happen to their home when they returned. In May of 1980 the Environmental Protection Agency completed their chromosome study of

¹³⁶ Blum: 53.

¹³⁷ Krauss: 114.

¹³⁸ Jetter et al.: 41, 42.

several citizens living in the area. On May 17 the study was leaked before EPA officials could get to Love Canal to explain the results to participants. Citizens were outraged and extremely frightened when they learned that 11 out of 36 of the participants had damaged chromosomes, but were not immediately told who among them was included in this 11. When more complete information was offered to Love Canal residents, those with poor results felt another crushing blow to their hope for a positive outcome for the community. Levine witnessed as “One man in his late fifties wiped away his tears as he described how he carried out his parental responsibility [of informing his children], when he learned that he was one of those with aberrant findings.”¹³⁹

On May 19 two EPA officials, Dr. James Lucas and Frank Nepal, were meeting with members of the LCHA to discuss the study results. As the two sat in the office speaking with LCHA members, Gibbs and the others had a radical idea percolating in their heads. Suddenly, Nepal and Lucas found themselves held hostage by the housewives of Love Canal. Plied with brownies and cookies, in keeping with the performance of radical housewifery, Gibbs declared that the EPA officers would be held at LCHA offices until Love Canal received a concrete answer about permanent relocation. While the EPA officials were safely housed inside, Love Canal residents crowded around the building, yelling angrily about the injustice occurring in their community. That day, what had been peaceful yet angry protests gained a new edge: women waiting around the homeowner’s association blocked traffic and others set fire to a nearby lawn, burning the letters E.P.A. into the chemical tainted grass.¹⁴⁰ While Gibbs and the rest of LCHA had initially planned to keep EPA officials hostage only until they received an answer, the increasing anger of citizens disallowed her from letting the two go because she honestly disbelieved she could control the crowd. The two were finally released from the building when the FBI, no longer discounting these activists as “just housewives,” staked out buildings across the street. FBI officers escorted the two out later that night through the riotous crowd. While some residents were angry with Gibbs for submitting to the government, an ultimatum had been presented to President Carter:

¹³⁹ Levine: 144.

¹⁴⁰ Desalvo, Charlotte. "Love Canal Residents Hold Hostage 2 EPA Officials To Press Demands." *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* 20 May 1980: 2A. Print.

give an answer in 24 hours, on Wednesday May 21, or suffer worse rebellion at the hands of the housewives. A phone call to Gibbs announcing the relocation of about 700 families,¹⁴¹ the rest of those living around the canal, came the next day.

Winning the Last Battle

Though the call for final evacuation of all families came in May, the bill apportioning funds to actually move Love Canal residents was not signed until October. President Carter signed the bill that attributed the reason for evacuation to “mental anguish” to residents¹⁴² in front of a crowd in Niagara Falls. In the same month, the Federal Emergency Management Agency offered \$5 million to put families in motels on a temporary basis. This apportionment of funds was the first time federal emergency funds had been used on a human-caused disaster.¹⁴³ On December 20, of 1979 the United States Justice Department had filed against Hooker Chemical for \$124 million, with only part of this money intended to pay for clean up at Love Canal.¹⁴⁴ All of these funding sources would come together to work on buying residents’ homes and cleaning up wastes at the canal. Despite governmental concessions for clean-up, there was still much doubt and disagreement about the health effects of chemical contamination at Love Canal. The Thomas Panel Report, released in 1980 stated, “there has been no demonstration of acute health effects linked to exposure of hazardous wastes at the Love Canal site.”¹⁴⁵ However, the Thomas Panel, named after Dr. Lewis Thomas, the chair of the panel and chancellor of Memorial Sloan-Kettering hospital, was unable to entirely rule out health effects. The New York State Department of Health’s follow-up health report study, published in October of 2008 also concluded only vague increases in cancer, birth defects and mortality. While the number of birth defects was elevated in the study, cancer

¹⁴¹ Omicinski, John. “Carey Urges Permanent Relocation of 710 Canal Families.” *Niagara Gazette*, May 24, 1980.
<http://library.buffalo.edu/specialcollections/lovecanal/documents/clippings/5-24-80a1.html>.

¹⁴² *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 23.

¹⁴³ Breton: 124.

¹⁴⁴ Levine: 138.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 152.

incidents were lower than the controls.¹⁴⁶ These data are even more confusing when compared with the studies prepared by LCHA, which show a ridiculously high number of birth defects and cancer in the area.

After a drawn out legal battle, in 1983 residents of Love Canal who had joined in on a class-action lawsuit won against Occidental Chemical Cooperation to pay for the medical costs of the living plaintiffs. Two years later, in 1985 residents established the Love Canal Medical Fund to organize funds. In 1994 Occidental agreed to pay an additional \$98 million to cover the state of New York's clean-up costs for the canal.¹⁴⁷

Love Canal's effects on policy in New York and the United States as a whole are marked. "Shortly after Love Canal was identified as a serious health hazard, a second task force established by Governor Carey reported the presence of 215 waste-disposal sites in the Erie-Niagara County area. Of the total—based on figures supplied by local industries—36 definitely contained hazardous-waste products and another 116 'may have received significant quantities of hazardous wastes'."¹⁴⁸ Without activism at Love Canal, it is possible these dumps would have had to go through the same lengthy activism and litigation process, or have escaped attention altogether. Hooker did its best to counteract negative publicity against industry, beginning to publish full-page newspaper advertisements and brochures exclaiming their guiltlessness in 1979, but the excess of toxic waste dumps in the area and throughout the country demonstrated a final shift in public opinion—chemicals were harmful. Love Canal also dug a less treacherous path for American citizens in similar situations, as many would follow. In setting a precedent for citizens seeking toxic cleanup, Love Canal left a lasting impression in public policy. As American sociologist Allan Schnaiberg explains, "[T]his outreach and national publicity did help create a more favorable political climate for Superfund legislation."¹⁴⁹ Though

¹⁴⁶ *Love Canal Follow-Up Study*. Rep.: State of New York Department of Health, 2008. State of New York Department of Health. Web.
<http://www.health.ny.gov/environmental/investigations/love_canal/docs/report_public_comment_final.pdf>.: 52.

¹⁴⁷ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 198.

¹⁴⁸ Levine: 218.

¹⁴⁹ Schnaiberg, Allan. "Environmental Movements Since Love Canal: Hope, Despair &(and)(Im)mobilization." *Buffalo Environmental Law Journal* 8 (2001 2000): 206.

this activism did reinforce maternalism in female activism, women working within the movement were not working for progressive change in societal gender roles (although they did achieve some), rather progressive yet tangible community changes for areas with toxic waste contamination.

Hostages and Housewives

Love Canal housewife activists were able to garner attention for the movement through their caring framework, but their increasingly radical actions and feelings also allowed them to receive more immediate media attention. Progressively more radical tactics demonstrated a common theme among women participating in the anti-toxics movement: disillusionment with government and political authorities. Gibbs' "working-class group, desperate to escape the area, resorted to more radical tactics over time,"¹⁵⁰ the most radical being the actual hostage situation created when two EPA officers visited the LCHA headquarters. This radical move, akin to tools used by anti-Vietnam student groups indicates the desperation housewife activists felt in attempting to obtain their goals of clean up. Radicalization demonstrates not only influence from other social and political movements, but a level of emotional connection to the situation often not present in less local movements. At Love Canal: "women vandalized a construction site, burned effigies of the governor, and were arrested during a baby-carriage blockade"¹⁵¹ in addition to assembling a Mother's Day die-in demonstration¹⁵² and a die-in performance outside a Hooker open house event.¹⁵³ Two of these activist performance pieces are directly tied to the idea of motherhood—explicitly showing the link these housewife activists made between their radical actions and their reasons for upholding protests for help in Love Canal.

¹⁵⁰ Blum: 5.

¹⁵¹ Krauss: 111.

¹⁵² Gottlieb: 209.

¹⁵³ Westmoore, Paul. "Hooker Holds Open House, Canal Groups Stage Demonstration." *Niagara Gazette*, June 8, 1980.
<http://library.buffalo.edu/specialcollections/lovecanal/documents/clippings/6-8-801.html>.



Love Canal Residents Burn Effigies of New York Governor Hugh Carey and New York State Health Commissioner David Axelrod, 1981. Courtesy, University Archives: Ecumenical Task Force of the Niagara Frontier Records, State University of New York at Buffalo

By associating motherhood with radical protests, these women further solidified the concept of environmental housewife activism as a movement inspired by the common belief that all humans should have the right to health and safety and that mothers have some authority over health. Pairing motherly, caring imagery with disturbing, morbid imagery created shock value, putting Love Canal in the news. It was not until all of these radical protests continued to occur “that government officials began to notice.”¹⁵⁴ In using their typically innocuous motherly roles to foster radical protest, these women made radical demonstration widely acceptable and received. Sometimes just protesting was not enough, and “Arrested while picketing to halt the state’s containment operation,

¹⁵⁴ Mellor: 21.

Gibbs found herself in jail for several hours.”¹⁵⁵ These protests provided a radical outlet for real emotions, which could not be entirely expressed through letters, phone calls or resident petitions. Levine explains, “They were genuine outlets for angry feelings; they provided a sense of doing something more dramatic than the laborious tasks carried on in the Homeowners Association office; and they attracted media attention, which was important to the association.”¹⁵⁶ Ultimately, continued and sustained media attention became LCHA’s most consistent promise for acknowledgment from the government. Due to the lack of knowledge and understanding about toxic waste issues, as well as the relatively little political recognition given to the blue-collar citizens in the area, “Love Canal had to be dragged into prominence” – compared to other highly recognizable environmental disasters.¹⁵⁷ Love Canal created a new type of environmental catastrophe in the United States public consciousness because of the serious work that housewife activists (as well as other community organizers) contributed to receiving recognition.

No Longer “Just Housewives”

Even after the battle at Love Canal had mostly been won, Gibbs was sure to retrospectively attribute the majority of the fight to motherly duties, creating cohesiveness in the movement from beginning to end. By continuing to speak about her Love Canal activism, and the actions of the Love Canal Homeowner’s Association in these terms, Gibbs further solidified the prototype for the archetypal housewife activist. In the end she said, “I guess that’s the real reason why we did fight so hard—for our children.”¹⁵⁸ As she addresses her role as a mother as a catalyst for her successful actions, Gibbs frames her socially constructed gender role as conducive rather than detrimental to the environmental anti-toxics movement. Because of this framework, Gibbs and the other housewives in her organization stepped beyond the stigma against their lack of expertise and became actual experts on chemical contamination and health hazards in their community and in communities much like it across the country.

¹⁵⁵ Breton: 123.

¹⁵⁶ Levine: 201.

¹⁵⁷ Seager: 265.

¹⁵⁸ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 182.

After years of protesting, dealing with government hacks and facing constant disappointment, these housewife activists *were* activists. A common testament in female activist interviews and in Gibbs' own writing is the changes these women underwent throughout the course of their movement. Gibbs says, "I was becoming tougher and more political as I understood better what I had to do"¹⁵⁹ and "I grew through the Love Canal process."¹⁶⁰ Many women also found it difficult to go back to working solely in the home, even though they often expressed a desire to do so when their first campaign has ended. After Love Canal, the housewives who had participated in LCHA were empowered by their work. In the beginning of what Gibbs refers to as "organizing" she says: "We were all innocent then. Debbie [Cerrillo] has since changed considerably. [...] she is one of the most effective association workers."¹⁶¹ Truthfully, "Debbie Ce[r]rillo, who described herself as 'Suzy Homemaker' prior to Love Canal, stated that she 'wasn't interested' in the women's movement, since 'that wasn't the warm, fuzzy, do cooking and cleaning and taking care of your baby thing'."¹⁶² Cerrillo's transformation is indicative of a wider shift in many of the women working at Love Canal.

¹⁵⁹ *Love Canal: And the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*: 74.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 219.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* 100.

¹⁶² Blum: 48.



Abandoned and Partially Demolished Home of Lois Gibbs, 1980. Courtesy, University Archives: Ecumenical Task Force of the Niagara Frontier Records, State University at New York at Buffalo

Gibbs' very language and testimony are important to analyze because in the way she writes, compared to her initial interviews where she could barely speak into a microphone, one is capable of noticing the ways in which she learned to frame her fight as a mother and execute her fight as an activist. "We bring the authority of mother—who can condemn mothers? —it is a tool we have. [...] when the public sees our children it brings a concrete, moral dimension to our experience—they are not an abstract statistic."¹⁶³ Housewife activists are powerfully aware of the authority and control they hold as mothers to play gender stereotypes to their advantage. By taking advantage of rather than entirely rejecting traditional archetypes, housewife activists are able to gain ground and attention for their movements. Lois Gibbs and others at LCHA grabbed both parts of their identities, developed them concurrently and used them effectively to receive governmental and public recognition for their community, helping to structure a dynamic environmental, social and political movement in the process.

¹⁶³ Krauss: 113.

Chapter 3. The Stringfellow Acid Pits

The Neighborhood

Glen Avon is an unincorporated town in Riverside County, part of Southern California's Inland Empire. In the early 1980s it was a rural, agricultural area and at the time of the Stringfellow Acid Pits those living in the area were mostly working class. A 2005 *Los Angeles Times* article describes the community as “an impoverished rural pocket of the county”¹⁶⁴—in an area of California still largely fueled by Los Angeles' continued sprawl and rising environmental degradation from expanding aerospace, defense and technology industries. Surrounded by freeways and a scrubby, mostly dirt landscape, Glen Avon does not resemble an oasis as we commonly imagine it, but the town was such for many families who had settled there, putting down roots, having children and starting a life. At the 1970 United States Census, the population of the town was under 10,000,¹⁶⁵ though it is difficult to fully estimate the exact number of inhabitants due to its unincorporated status.

Much like in the Love Canal neighborhood, many of those in the area were young families, some who had lived in the Inland Empire since they were born. The acid pits had been built in the community before many, but not all, residents moved to the town and most living there “had no idea that [they] were being exposed to toxic chemicals”.¹⁶⁶ Much like Love Canal, the location of this toxic dumpsite was not coincidental, placed in an area inhabited by mostly rural agricultural and working-class families who had low political impact in California and the country. According to activist Penny Newman, “it was not until people noticed children's tennis shoes falling apart, and Levis disintegrating that [they] began to suspect something.”¹⁶⁷ Newman's allusion to classic American archetypes like Levi's and tennis shoes paints Glen Avon as a symbol for an average

¹⁶⁴ Wilson, Janet. “Insurers to Pay \$93 Million to Clean Up Stringfellow Pits.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 2005. <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/feb/02/local/me-stringfellow2>.

¹⁶⁵ Census, United States Bureau of the. *1970 Census of Population. Characteristics of the Population: United States Summary*. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973: 1125.

¹⁶⁶ Newman, Penny. *Killing Legally with Toxic Waste: Women and the Environment in the United States*. Article. Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Uppsala, Sweden: 53.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 53.

American town in a largely unknown area of the country. The pits were seen as innocuous by most, and “Children from the community were drawn to the spectacle of acres of ‘water’ in pond after pond. The attraction brought children from the valley below to the canyon to hike, explore, ride horses and bikes, and even paddle around the ponds in [a] boat.”¹⁶⁸ When the community came to realize the danger the pits presented, grassroots activist groups formed with the goal to close the dump, remove it and clean up the contamination. Again, the battle for recognition was long and arduous, ending in litigation that cost almost as much as it won for injured residents.

In combating toxic contamination, mothers and homemakers in Glen Avon gathered around a central leader, Penny Newman, and became increasingly radical in their efforts to receive media attention and governmental action. However, much like other toxic waste sites, additional players deserve recognition for their work on the site, most notably, Ruth Kirkby, another woman who consciously framed her activism in a manner entirely separate from housewife activism. Stringfellow serves as an interesting case study because of the contrast in these two women’s activism, exhibiting the array of activist methods utilized by women and demonstrating the receipt of both by government bodies and media. By serving as foils for each other, Kirkby and Newman indicate the strengths and weaknesses of housewife activism and its importance within the larger context of anti-toxic waste movements. Stringfellow, though different in many ways, also shows similarities to Love Canal, especially in the working-class roots of the area as well as activists’ usage of a caring dialectic and radical protest tactics in response to low recognition from political authorities. About as far from New York as geographically possible in the United States, the two sites as case studies demonstrate thematic links between housewife activist movements against toxic waste contamination in working-class communities where political impact is seen as low by governing bodies. Women in both communities, seeing the injustice in their environmental marginalization, grasped their identities as housewives and exhibited their anger in radical protests to receive public recognition for their cause.

¹⁶⁸ Newman, Penny. Ed. Davin Diaz and Laurel Bellante. *Remembering Stringfellow* (2 Oct. 2004): 1-99. Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice. Web: 3.

Acid Trips

The Stringfellow Acid Pits opened in 1956 following a 1955 investigation conducted by state engineering geologist Robert Fox. Fox found the quarry at the site owned by James Stringfellow to be satisfactorily impervious¹⁶⁹ for the toxic waste dump pressured by the regional water board, the state and a budding manufacturing industry in the area. According to Fox, “We used to do these things with, what we would call today, pocket money [...] We didn’t have the funds in those days to do the comprehensive studies we do these days”¹⁷⁰ and “Fox said he looked at the property and studied maps and geologic reports. He did no ‘subsurface’ testing such as borings”¹⁷¹ which would have determined definite impermeability. So dumping began. One mile north of Glen Avon, just a road away from unsuspecting inhabitants, the pits sat atop the Jurupa mountains in the drainage path of 270 acres of the canyon watershed and at the head of Pyrite Creek.¹⁷² James Stringfellow was initially wary of using his property for a toxic dump, worrying about the chemicals that might be emptied there and the management procedures the dump would require. However, the State of California assured Stringfellow the dump was harmless. Stringfellow complied.

During the pits’ usage, dumpers from around the Inland Empire and the Los Angeles region trucked hundreds of different chemicals to the open-air pits in continuous trips, additionally spraying hazardous liquids into the air for “solar evaporation.”¹⁷³ The U.S. Air Force was the first dumper at Stringfellow, unloading chemicals used to

¹⁶⁹ *Remembering Stringfellow*.

¹⁷⁰ Hearn, Lorie. “First Dumping at Stringfellow Failed to Draw Much Attention.” *Press Enterprise* n.d., sec. B: 1B-4B. Print.

¹⁷¹ “First Dumping at Stringfellow Failed to Draw Much Attention.”

¹⁷² U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Superfund Record of Decision: Stringfellow, Mira Loma, CA” (1983). *All U.S. Government Documents*. EPA ID: CAT080012826.

<[http://yosemite.epa.gov/r9/sfund/r9sfdocw.nsf/3dc283e6c5d6056f88257426007417a2/ecb07f30d7735b2b882575fd007932f9/\\$FILE/stringfellow%20source%20control-interim%20abatement%20ROD.pdf](http://yosemite.epa.gov/r9/sfund/r9sfdocw.nsf/3dc283e6c5d6056f88257426007417a2/ecb07f30d7735b2b882575fd007932f9/$FILE/stringfellow%20source%20control-interim%20abatement%20ROD.pdf)>

¹⁷³ “Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11.” Interview by Judith “Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11”: and Cherstin Lyon. Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice. Web: 4.

refurbish missiles at nearby Norton Air Force Base in San Bernardino.¹⁷⁴ Later, multitudinous industries would dump there, complicating activist and litigation attempts to assign blame and scientific attempts to fully categorize all chemicals present. As Stringfellow's 16-year lifetime as a hazardous waste dump continued, regulation enforcement became more and more lax. By 1971, "local manufacturers received a brochure that read, 'If your company finds it necessary to dump on a weekend or during the night, arrangements can be made by telephone with our office.'"¹⁷⁵ Later it is rumored that no call was required and the gate to the pits was left unlocked for unlimited access to 24/7 dumping privileges. Throughout the life of the dump, 34 million gallons of liquid wastes were poured into the pits including heavy metals, solvents, pesticides like DDT, as well as sulfuric, nitric and hydrochloric acids¹⁷⁶ that gave the pits their no-nonsense name. Though closed in 1972¹⁷⁷ after pressure from Ruth Kirkby's Mothers of Glen Avon,¹⁷⁸ the pits continued to plague the community.

The most visible indications of problems at Stringfellow, besides likely injuries among dumping truck drivers, were chemical overflows through the 1960s and 1970s. Caused by abnormally high rains for Southern California, the waste ponds overflowed into Pyrite channel and down into Glen Avon for the first time in the late 1960s.¹⁷⁹ Flooded chemicals would run through the curbless¹⁸⁰ Glen Avon streets and into residents' lawns on several more occasions. In February of 1971 a chemical fire erupted in one of the pits as a truck discharged its wastes.¹⁸¹ The floods and fire not only unleashed small rivers of chemicals into the city, the incidents also "unleashed a torrent

¹⁷⁴ Gottlieb: 163.

¹⁷⁵ Hitt, Jack. "Toxic Dreams: A California Town Finds Meaning in an Acid Pit." *Harper's Magazine* 1 July 1995. Print: 1.

¹⁷⁶ Colten, Craig E., and Peter N. Skinner. *The Road to Love Canal: Managing Industrial Waste before EPA*. Austin: University of Texas, 1996. Print: 155.

¹⁷⁷ Hitt: 1.

¹⁷⁸ Analysis of Community Involvement in Hazardous Waste Site Problems: A Report to the Office of Emergency and Remedial Response United States Environmental Protection Agency – July 1981: 82.

¹⁷⁹ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 80.

¹⁸⁰ "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11.": 5.

¹⁸¹ *Remembering Stringfellow*.

of fears among the people of Glen Avon.”¹⁸² In 1972, a monitoring well meant to measure the presence of hazardous chemicals escaping the site found hexavalent chromium had migrated to Glen Avon Elementary School. The same year, another well closer to the site showed “significant levels” of sulfate, chloride, nitrate and hexavalent chromium.¹⁸³ These tests pushed community groups to request the closure of the site. Residents, especially Kirkby, penned copious letters to the Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) to close Stringfellow, while industry who depended on the site pushed back with lawsuits and money to keep the site running. Flooding occurred again in 1972 and on December 13, 1972 the site “closed” the open-air pits for the last time, largely due to community pressure from a group led by Ruth Kirkby.¹⁸⁴



Untitled, no date. Courtesy, University Archives: Ruth Kirkby Stringfellow Collection, University of California Riverside

¹⁸² *Remembering Stringfellow*: 3.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* 4.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 5.

Then Came the Floods

In 1978, high rain levels once again visited Southern California, washing out the Van Buren bridge¹⁸⁵ and nearly causing another overflow of chemicals out of the open storage pits. At the decision of James Anderson, executive officer of the RWQCB, liquids were emptied into the streets to prevent larger overflow.¹⁸⁶ Foaming in ponds, down into the town of Glen Avon, the chemicals destroyed front yards. According to Kirkby, “These liquids flowed down the street in great quantities, flowed out into the fields, into the pastures, children played in the liquids and no one stopped them”¹⁸⁷ and “The kids lathered themselves with the foam, making beards and becoming ‘snowmen’.”¹⁸⁸ Residents of the area were caught off guard by the flood. Newman claimed that “We just assumed that the agencies in charge of it were taking care of it. And I think that’s the approach most people have, you know, that while the system’s there, they’ll take care of it ... you know, if it’s important, they’ll let us know.”¹⁸⁹ This type of governmental and industrial negligence would soon become more familiar to those residing in Glen Avon, as they began to fight against the continued and ominous presence of chemicals in their community.

Initially, residents of the community were hopeful that California political bodies would work on containing and cleaning the contamination when it was brought to their attention. However, like many other sites suffering toxic contamination, governmental bodies had been aware of and had largely ignored or only rudimentarily dealt with leaks and dam breaks at Stringfellow since the sixties. Hearings in 1974 discussed a possible reopening of the site, and though this proposition was struck down,¹⁹⁰ talk of increased public danger due to unregulated dumping at non-designated toxic waste sites depict popular opinion about toxic contamination at the time. Industry’s sway in the area and the

¹⁸⁵ "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11.": 4.

¹⁸⁶ "Stringfellow." *Superfund Site Overview, Pacific Southwest, US EPA*. Environmental Protection Agency. Web.

¹⁸⁷ Dokich, Traci A. *Deposition of Ruth Kirkby (Volume I)*. 1987. Stringfellow Collection Box 12 Folder 2. University of California Riverside: 22.

¹⁸⁸ *Remembering Stringfellow*.

¹⁸⁹ "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11.": 5.

¹⁹⁰ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 7.

country was deep-rooted. In 1975, RWQCB declared the site “a public nuisance,”¹⁹¹ a humorous title, suggesting the site was more an annoyance than a danger. Either way, the designation meant the group would begin investigations into possible remediation at the site. The board’s minimal action following their study indicates a lack of support or belief in the importance of contamination in Glen Avon. As demonstrated by Anderson’s personal authorization for the pumping of contaminated water into the community’s flood channels in 1978¹⁹² indicates, investing in the clean-up of Glen Avon was not a top priority. Though several citizen groups, notably Ruth Kirkby’s Mothers of Glen Avon (later Parents of Jurupa) were already applying pressure to the regional board and the state to clean up the pits, one woman received the most attention in Stringfellow’s media circus: Penny Newman.

Becoming a Housewife Activist

When Penny Newman first moved to Glen Avon in the mid-1970s, she was a young mother-to-be, wide-eyed with the prospect of her new domestic lifestyle. She writes, “I was 19, newly married, three months pregnant with my first child, and very excited at starting a new life in a new home in a small rural community; just the kind of place I dreamed of raising my children.”¹⁹³ Following the oft-described themes of housewife anti-toxic activism, Newman believed she was living the American Dream when she settled in the Inland Empire community. According to Gottlieb, “She had grown up about twenty miles east of Glen Avon and assumed she would raise her family in a peaceful, nonurban setting, where neighborliness and community values prevailed.”¹⁹⁴ However, for Newman, dangerous realizations related to her maternal role came even before her first child was born—she miscarried when she was five and a half months pregnant.¹⁹⁵

Newman’s entrance to housewife activism is unique in that she did not initially have a role in the organization of community activism surrounding Stringfellow and she

¹⁹¹ “Superfund Record of Decision: Stringfellow, Mira Loma, CA.”

¹⁹² *Remembering Stringfellow*: 10.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Gottlieb: 164.

¹⁹⁵ *Remembering Stringfellow*.

was not a stay at home mother, but a teacher, although she did subscribe to traditional domestic roles of caring for her two children. Newman became aware of the pits through another leadership activity, one often stereotyped as a motherly duty—the PTA. Newman also worked as chair of the Environmental Committee of the Junior Women’s Club. Though Newman does not necessarily call herself a housewife, she does consciously frame her fight in terms of motherhood and children and was portrayed as a “hysterical housewife,” giving her a similar activist paradigm to Gibbs. Additionally, Newman’s organization membership was largely built up of housewives and Newman’s writings cite the power of housewife activism, demonstrating her personal acceptance and identification with the working-class housewife activist movement.

Similar to other anti-toxic housewife activists, Newman connected her own children’s health issues to national issues of chemical contamination and thus expanded her interest to “all children” suffering from the side effects of contact with toxics. Newman’s two sons were both born in Glen Avon and each of them suffered from various maladies such as asthma, blurred vision, dizzy spells, headaches and others. Though Newman’s second son was initially healthier than her first and she “thought ‘finally, I was doing something right as a mother’, ”¹⁹⁶ his good health ended when he began attending the community school, located on Pyrite Street directly below the pits. Newman’s voiced connection between good motherhood and childhood health demonstrates her conscious intertwining of her toxic waste activism with her role as a mother. Newman links the necessity of protecting her children to fighting for clean-up in order to keep them healthy, framing Newman’s role in Stringfellow within housewife activism. As her children grew, Newman was not a stranger to parental fear and explains, “My husband and I would take turns lying awake at night listening to him struggle to breathe, knowing that at some point we would have to rush him to the hospital” when he suffered asthma attacks.¹⁹⁷

Newman was initially more confident about her leadership skills than many housewife activists. Though she often recognized her lack of technical expertise within chemistry and other scientific subjects relating to the site, she was versed in community

¹⁹⁶ *Remembering Stringfellow*.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*.

leadership and was extremely focused on the importance of the community in decision-making. She writes, “‘community’ does not mean local government. It means the residents”¹⁹⁸ and “The ‘environment’ for the women in our communities is the place in which we live, and that means everything that affects our lives,”¹⁹⁹ not just those connected to the traditional perception of the private sphere. These statements construct a conception of the movement as a local community issue affecting every aspect of life in Glen Avon. Thus, the pits were intimately tied to both public and private life in the area, as the two were inseparable in her all-encompassing “everything that affects our lives.” By disallowing the technical aspects of Stringfellow’s chemistry from remaining in the public sphere, and stepping out of private sphere terrain in identifying family health issues, Newman subverted traditional beliefs about community activism for women.

Newman diverges from many housewife activists in terms of her initial confidence about environmental organizing. However, Newman’s focus on community, herself and family as a holistic unit (again pinning together public and private), shows her consistent efforts to frame activism at Stringfellow in a new domain representative of housewife activism. She writes, “I think I am a smart, strategic, I’m a good person, and so I don’t under-estimate that. I know I have skills, and talents that I bring to the table, but they wouldn’t be anything without the rest of the skills and talents that are found in our communities, that bring it forward.”²⁰⁰ Though speaking in hindsight, Newman expresses more self-assurance than many housewife activists initially do. This may be due to her previous leadership experience, her role as a schoolteacher within the community or her belief that “I come by my activism and my involvement in politics honestly”²⁰¹ due to her mother’s stint as Perris, California’s first female mayor. Newman also focuses heavily on her community, a notable distinction in blue-collar housewife activist movements, where women focus on community decision-making in areas where communities often do not have large amounts of political impact.

¹⁹⁸ "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11.": 17.

¹⁹⁹ *Killing Legally with Toxic Waste: Women and the Environment in the United States*: 51.

²⁰⁰ "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11.": 18.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.* 1.

Despite some differences, Newman did frame her fight as one connected to motherhood and was categorized as such in the media as well. At the start of her organizing, she explains “We were looked at as ‘hysterical housewives’ who were just over-reacting. You know, the experts were telling us everything was fine. That even releasing the chemicals into the community—it was mixed with floodwaters you know, from the rainwater—so it was diluted. It couldn’t possibly be a problem.”²⁰² These dismissive attitudes and the infamous moniker “hysterical housewives”—seemingly applied to any women who dare open her mouth in a political arena—echo occurrences in similar housewife movements. To these types of provocations from authority figures, Newman responded with a reference to children, another demonstration of her housewife framing. She explains, “The workers aren’t out there eating dirt (laughing) in the playground, or getting it on their hands and then eating a peanut butter sandwich, you know, the things kids do.”²⁰³ Again, Newman’s use of buzzwords like “kids,” “playground,” and “peanut butter sandwich” are designed to strike a note with the American public. By peppering interviews with keywords like these, Newman was able to establish a housewife activism framework that she consciously adopted as an activist tool. Though a useful method, this framing was not without its shortcomings. As Gottlieb writes, “Newman herself, at one meeting in the early 1980s, recalled being told directly by Blake Early, a top Sierra Club staff member and former lobbyist with Environmental Action, that community-based female activists were inappropriate participants in the toxics arena. ‘How come women like you aren’t home,’ Early had said, half-jokingly, to Newman’s shock and dismay.”²⁰⁴ By not staying at home, Newman and others drove private arena issues of family and health into public, “look[ing] at the environment from the perspective of families”²⁰⁵ and reframing environmental activism around personal issues and gaining support of the American public. Though Newman was not a stay-at-home-mother, she can still be categorized as a “housewife activist” because of her emphasis on family and the importance of mothers in community activism.

²⁰² "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11.": 3.

²⁰³ Ibid. 3.

²⁰⁴ Gottlieb: 168.

²⁰⁵ "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11.": 1.

Hysterical Housewives: the Scientific and the Domestic

Newman's development as a housewife activist is especially notable when considered alongside the activism of Glen Avon resident Ruth Kirkby. The two women first met in 1973 when Kirkby asked Newman to cancel her agenda for the next PTA meeting in order to discuss the Stringfellow Acid Pits.²⁰⁶ Though Newman refused, she did take the opportunity to learn about the pits at the county health department (where she was told Kirkby was a hysterical housewife), potentially spawning her entire role in Stringfellow activism. In her 1988 deposition, Newman denies reading or knowing anything about the site prior to Kirkby's contact.²⁰⁷

Kirkby and Newman represent the two most vocal spokespeople of two of the most present community organizations in the history of the Stringfellow site. Because both are women involved in environmental advocacy that pressured the government, they have both been referred to as hysterical housewives at one point. In comparing the two, it is apparent that Newman chose to emphasize the motherly aspect of her identity while Kirkby attempted to focus on her scientific background, sometimes without success. In toxic waste cases, governmental officials often rest on the role of the "expert" as a reason to turn a blind eye to community complaints. Kirkby's combination of expertise and female gender made her a veritable opponent for industry defenders. But, Newman, who painted a less threatening portrait of herself as a caring mother and citizen, received the most media attention.

Kirkby's Parents of Jurupa were involved in the Stringfellow case several years before Newman's organization Concerned Neighbors in Action, even pushing the closure of the site altogether. The two groups varied in both demographics and in methods, though both groups held ultimate removal of the site as their premier goal.²⁰⁸ A 1981 EPA report discussing community activism at the site claims, "Members of the Parents of Jurupa tend to be at least middle aged and long-time residents of the Glen Avon area. [...] They are more knowledgeable than average citizens on topics such as geology,

²⁰⁶ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 6.

²⁰⁷ Dokich: 760, lines 16-19.

²⁰⁸ Analysis of Community Involvement in Hazardous Waste Site Problems: A Report to the Office of Emergency and Remedial Response United States Environmental Protection Agency – July 1981: 75.

chemistry, and hydrology, especially as these subjects relate to the Stringfellow site.”²⁰⁹ Other observations in the report described the group as “level headed” and “realistic.” Despite these descriptions, Kirkby was often scorned by government officials for her persistence and indeed “Some believe Ruth Kirby, the group’s leader, has been too vocal emotional” [sic],²¹⁰ although she is also described as bright.

The report also enumerated details about Concerned Neighbors in Action, its shorter life in the community and stereotyped “housewife” image. The EPA writes, “They are likely to be young housewives with young children.”²¹¹ This estimation is not far from Newman’s own assertions about the group as she explains, “I think that’s what everyone goes with, what touches you personally.”²¹² For Newman and many other housewives in the area, the health of their children brought Stringfellow to their attention. However, the EPA report goes on to explain, “Older residents and local officials consider them to be emotional and very impatient.”²¹³ In both groups, despite their explained differences or even recognized levels of intelligence, women involved in community activism are described as “emotional.” These categorizations, by the public and governmental agencies alike, demonstrate the importance of the activist-adopted housewife activist identity. Consistently branded as emotional or hysterical, women and housewives created autonomy from this categorization that is often placed with reckless abandon on female activists by adopting the often essentialized stereotype of “housewife” and using it to describe their activism on their own terms.

Ruth Kirkby and Penny Newman show two often opposing aspects of the Stringfellow fight, but Newman’s position as a housewife activist and Kirkby’s occasional categorization as a housewife indicates the pressures of public opinion in defining female activists as emotional. In order to focus more specifically on their

²⁰⁹ Analysis of Community Involvement in Hazardous Waste Site Problems: A Report to the Office of Emergency and Remedial Response United States Environmental Protection Agency: 75, 76.

²¹⁰ Ibid. 76.

²¹¹ Ibid. 76.

²¹² "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11.": 3.

²¹³ Analysis of Community Involvement in Hazardous Waste Site Problems: A Report to the Office of Emergency and Remedial Response United States Environmental Protection Agency: 76.

activism rather than combating a projected public image, housewife activists adopt and accept the housewife label and reject the “hysterical” aspect of the name. Additionally, housewife activists like Newman can apply “common sense”²¹⁴ and emotion to scientific situations that may initially reject the validity of these tools in understanding or evaluating impacts and policy decisions surrounding environmental threats.

To “put a face” on the issue²¹⁵

Eight members of the Glen Avon community founded Concerned Neighbors in Action (CNA) in 1979. Seven of the founders were women, one was a man.²¹⁶ According to Newman, who was not among the original founders but attended some initial meetings,²¹⁷ “this rag tag little neighborhood group [...] just started having informal meetings to discuss ... Okay ... what’s real? What have you heard? [...] these were people who already knew each other.”²¹⁸ The preexisting relationships between CNA members and its description as a “rag tag group” indicates its strong community base. Though men were involved in the group, when Newman joined in 1980 housewife framing became the chosen activist context for the group. She believed that women were the best bases for Stringfellow activism because “Women, rooted in the community, know when things are not right. And it has been these women who have forced change.”²¹⁹ With the groups initial formation, some CNA members “who had been involved with Parents of Jurupa” chose to break away from the group²²⁰—an indication of later tensions that would pervade the Stringfellow activism movement. Newman became the chair of the organization in 1981, a title she had previously shared with resident Ricki Clarke.²²¹ Though Newman held a technically authoritative position from an early stage of the groups’ efforts, she claims, “the titles are not important in the group.

²¹⁴ "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11.": 4.

²¹⁵ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 28.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.* 12.

²¹⁷ Dokich: 764, lines 20-25.

²¹⁸ "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11.": 6.

²¹⁹ *Killing Legally with Toxic Waste: Women and the Environment in the United States*: 55.

²²⁰ Dokich: 763, lines 19-21.

²²¹ *Ibid.* 769 line 20, 770 lines 16-18.

It didn't function that way."²²² Still, Newman's unofficial position as the spokesperson for CNA led her to lead the movement in terms of media portrayal, allowing for the housewife framing that has defined the group's legacy.

From the start CNA focused on gaining media attention, along with other methods to garner community interest like door-to-door canvassing, passing out leaflets announcing public meetings and purchasing advertisements in the local paper.²²³ The group's first public meeting was held on March 25, 1980, with 175 people in attendance.²²⁴ Community meetings would later grow to include as many as 1,000 people. At this time, Newman had already been nominated as chair of the organization, elucidating her strong hand in forming its mission from the beginning. This community meeting was eye-opening for many residents of Glen Avon who "for the first time compared health problems and identified concerns"²²⁵ about contamination in the area. The organization's first steps were small, mostly focusing on increasing political pressure on governmental bodies and receiving publicity for the pits. Newman describes the organization as grassroots and informal, "You know, we met in a living room of somebody's house, and that was the organization. We didn't have more than \$300.00 in our account at any time, and people would take turns ... 'Oh, we need fliers! Oh, I'll pay for it this month.'"²²⁶ Newman's emphasis on the home as the base for activism again places public organizing in the context of the private sphere, incorporating the two.

Though CNA was spearheaded by many who had lack of experience with activism, the group, along with the Parents of Jurupa and the Campaign for Economic Democracy headed by national counterculture activist Tom Hayden, had concrete goals from the beginning. At the first community meeting, CNA presented RWQCB head Tim Anderson with an "Accountability Agreement" outlining their questions about the site and declaring universal right to health.²²⁷ The agreement asked for several studies to be

²²² Dokich: 772, lines 5-6.

²²³ Analysis of Community Involvement in Hazardous Waste Site Problems: A Report to the Office of Emergency and Remedial Response United States Environmental Protection Agency: 72.

²²⁴ Ibid. 72.

²²⁵ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 14

²²⁶ "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11.": 8.

²²⁷ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 15.

conducted in the community and though Anderson did cop to the rights of residents for a healthy life, he shook his head in denial of their pleas for health studies. While CNA did not receive positive affirmation of their requests, they did receive a media opportunity to demonstrate authority consciously rejecting their concerns, helping spawn their campaign against the government deniers who continually shaped Stringfellow decisions.

Largely based on CNA's pressures and relentless community meetings, letter writing and phone calls to governmental offices, in April, 1980 the RWQCB requested \$4 million for clean-up of the site under the jurisdiction of the region's Clean Water Bond Act.²²⁸ This request only partially appeased members of CNA, as the act allowed for a maximum request of \$11 million. The board refused to request the total amount because they believed it was impossible to get approval for such a large sum. On May 28, members of CNA including Newman flew to Sacramento with 2,000 signatures of Glen Avon community members, requesting the full \$11 million. On July 2, 1980 the regional board recommended full removal of all chemicals from the site.²²⁹

A False End

The July 2 vote seemed like a large victory for all residents of Glen Avon and the larger Inland Empire. In the grand scheme of the Stringfellow struggle this vote actually meant little to nothing, as a long and arduous bureaucratic hustle would follow the decision. After the board's verdict, a review of the potential cost led to the realization that complete removal would add up to much more than \$4 or even \$11 million. Instead, the board opted for an interim abatement project which would focus on removal of soil, pH neutralization of soil, installation of surface runoff channels, surface grading, clay and soil capping, installation of 20 chemical monitoring wells, supplementing the concrete barrier with a clay barrier and injecting gel into the bedrock below the barrier for increased impermeability.²³⁰ CNA and Parents of Jurupa were both focused on the ultimate goal of complete removal and were unsatisfied with the board's interim maneuver. In 1981 CNA had also formed a broad-based coalition network of grassroots

²²⁸ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 16.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* 19.

²³⁰ *Ibid.* 20.

groups, Communities Against Toxic Wastes in Landfills, adding support and confidence to the group's plight. These groups lobbied for the passage of a state superfund that would match the national superfund contributions.²³¹

State superfund had passed in October of 1981 and Governor Brown named Stringfellow the top priority site in California,²³² making it possible for the receipt of funds. Again, bureaucracy, and a later revealed EPA scandal involving the assistant administrator made these funds unattainable. The interim abatement process began in August 1982.²³³ In December, the board once again tried to jockey around community groups in announcing the interim method would be considered the final clean up. CNA was sick with the board's "incompetence" and launched a campaign to swap the power of lead control agency for Stringfellow to the State's Department of Health Services. DHS took over in January 1983.²³⁴

"You may understand we are frustrated"²³⁵: Tensions Escalate

In April of 1983 the United States EPA and the Department of Justice began meeting with potential responsible parties who had dumped at the site to determine how clean up finances would be divided.²³⁶ These negotiations were closed-door sessions to community members, and CNA filed with the Center for Law in the Public Interest in order to receive intervener status to discuss the matter. When Newman was given an audience with the Justice Department, DHS and the EPA, she asked them to meet her in her classroom. She recalls, "Anticipating that the meeting was intended to intimidate me, I arranged to meet them after school in the classroom where I taught second grade. As the nine attorneys arrived, they were seated at a second grade reading table. It was a bit difficult to intimidate someone seated in small chairs with your knees in your chin."²³⁷ This lighthearted reflection was not the pervading attitude at the time, as community members grew more and more frustrated with slow progress at the site. Though removal

²³¹ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 20.

²³² *Ibid.* 22

²³³ *Ibid.* 23

²³⁴ *Ibid.* 23

²³⁵ Kirkby, Ruth. Undated Note. UC Riverside Stringfellow Archive Box 16 Folder 1.

²³⁶ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 25, 26.

²³⁷ *Ibid.* 26.

of the site had been approved, the regional board was attempting to navigate around following through on their vote. From 1982 to 1984 tensions in the community escalated, demonstrating mounting dissatisfaction, especially within Newman's group—spurring radicalization.

On Easter of 1983, an illegal dumpsite was discovered to the southeast of the acid pits.²³⁸ Bomb casings along with lead nitrate, butazane and other rusting chemical drums were scattered in the surrounding area.²³⁹ The discovery of this site led to the realization that no complete survey of Pyrite Canyon had ever been conducted for toxic waste.²⁴⁰ For those living in Glen Avon, this site added insult to injury about the fear of toxic contamination. Unsurprisingly, an April 1983 congressional hearing held in the Glen Avon junior high gymnasium almost rioted. Nearly 1,000 residents crowded into the school, expectant of their chance to participate in community decision making. The atmosphere in the gym reflected the importance of mothers in Stringfellow advocacy as a journalist describes the scene, "There were mothers holding babies, small children with dolls, and a handful of children on the floor, coloring."²⁴¹

²³⁸ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 27.

²³⁹ Richardson, James. "Waste Found near Stringfellow Pits a Mystery to State." *The Press-Enterprise* n.d., sec. B: B1. University of California Riverside Ruth Kirkby Stringfellow Archives Box 2 Folder 1. UC Riverside Libraries. Print.

²⁴⁰ "Waste Found near Stringfellow Pits a Mystery to State."

²⁴¹ Zonder, Scott. "Lights, camera, action—as 600 crowd in for Stringfellow hearing." *The Press-Enterprise* 23 April 1983. Sec. County (B): B2. University of California Riverside Ruth Kirkby Stringfellow Archives Box 2 Folder 1. *UC Riverside Libraries*. Print.



Children at congressional hearing at Glen Avon Junior High, undated. Remembering Stringfellow: 35.

A few months later, in May 1983 statistical analysis found the birth defect rate in Glen Avon was double that of Riverside County in 1980 and 1981, affirming the suspicions and claims of many Glen Avon residents about the detrimental health effects of the pits.²⁴² In August, a brief reprieve from poor news arrived with EPA administrator Lee Thomas' announcement of a \$1 million release in Superfund money for the pits,²⁴³ although this did little to change the remediation efforts underway at the site. Bad news continued the next May when DHS announced they found radiation at the site in levels in excess of 45 times the acceptable level. The DDT byproduct pCBSA, which has no

²⁴² Richardson, James. "County Birth Defect Rate Double near Stringfellow Pits." *The Press Enterprise* 19 May 1983: Print.

²⁴³ *Remembering Stringfellow: 33.*

testing protocol or health information on its effects, was also found at the site and proved to be the most plentiful organic compound in the pits.²⁴⁴ In August of 1984, a report published by the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment claimed spreading underground contaminants from Stringfellow could continue spreading enough to harm the Chino Water basin,²⁴⁵ which supplies water for 500,000 people in the area.²⁴⁶ The report outlined the argument that engineers testing and working at the site, as well as the governmental bodies managing the site, had missed several indications that the site was unstable from the start, and was likely to cause contamination problems from its first use.²⁴⁷

The compilation of these factors, as well as the government's apparent lack of intention to actually remove the site wholly, pushed CNA to follow in the footsteps of other working-class toxic waste activists. In November 1984, CNA filed the "nation's largest toxic tort lawsuit," on behalf of about 3,800 plaintiffs and against more than 250 corporations as well as the state of California²⁴⁸— with Newman as head plaintiff. Many other plaintiffs were children (some who had reached adulthood by the time of the trial) who were believed to have suffered detrimental health effects because of the pits. CNA's decision to file lawsuits on behalf of children in the community further demonstrates the groups continued dedication to framing the toxic battle against Stringfellow in terms of motherhood. By highlighting children once again, CNA added an interesting element to the case for the media, as well as displaying their stance on receiving justice against the site's dumpers. As a working-class group, CNA was determined to receive some type of financial compensation for the citizens of Glen Avon who had become overcome by medical bills and the declining worth of an already undervalued area. Filing lawsuits acts as an important method for blue-collar activist groups who are looking for personal reparation along with government-funded clean-up.

²⁴⁴ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 35.

²⁴⁵ Gladwin, Hill. "Big Test Ahead for E.P.A. Superfund." *The New York Times* 26 August 1984. Print.

²⁴⁶ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 38.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 38.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 39.

Though CNA, an organization largely made up of women, was able to coordinate the lawsuit, many felt during this time that their housewife activist authority was being co-opted as Stringfellow began to receive more recognition. Newman said in an interview, “it was always women. [...] And we reached 1984 or 5, and all of a sudden there were these men in the room, and the attitude was: Okay, now it’s an important issue. Now you can all go home and take care of your kids.”²⁴⁹ Though women may have been left out of many negotiations, the CNA lawsuit allowed members to select their future actions in a calculated and self-directed manner, empowering the women behind the push for litigation.

A Final Resolution

In 1986 a federal judge ruled the largest dumpers at the site, including fifteen different companies, would be made to share the clean-up cost and processing at Stringfellow along with the state’s contributions and that of national Superfund money. In 1985 the state Department of Health Services had released the final health report begun in 1983. The report claimed no significant health impact at Stringfellow in terms of birth defects, mortality or cancer.²⁵⁰ Scientists who conducted research for the report specified the report was actually inconclusive²⁵¹; the report was also criticized by other epidemiologists.²⁵² The actual health effects experienced by those exposed to chemicals from the Stringfellow pits are contentious, much like at many other toxic waste sites, as scientific and “expert” studies have found no significant results while residents and other studies attest to elevated instances of respiratory issues, cancers and birth defects. Despite the debate over the actual health implications of the site, the media pressure applied to governmental bodies allowed for final clean-up of the site.

²⁴⁹ “Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11”: 15.

²⁵⁰ Baker, Dean B., Sander Greenland, James Mendlein, Patricia Harmon. “A Health Study of Two Communities Near the Stringfellow Waste Disposal Site.” *Archives of Environmental Health* 43 (1988). 325-335. Print.

²⁵¹ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 42.

²⁵² Wesson, Gaill. “Health professionals criticize acid pits study.” *The Press-Enterprise* 1 April 1986. Sec. B: B10. University of California Riverside Ruth Kirkby Stringfellow Archives Box 4 Folder 4. *UC Riverside Libraries*. Print.

Retribution for Glen Avon residents was extremely slow, the first of the community's civil lawsuits was not heard until 1992,²⁵³ though many of the defendants had settled before the first round of cases. Final settlements for the cases amounted to about \$96 million, to be paid by 200 companies, Riverside County and the owners of the site.²⁵⁴ The state's insurers also contributed to the pool,²⁵⁵ which was to be distributed mechanistically by Francis McGovern, a University of Alabama law professor and specialist in distributing mass-tort rewards.²⁵⁶ In total, personal lawsuits amounted to \$114 million for the Glen Avon plaintiffs,²⁵⁷ 75 percent of which went to the residents and 25 percent of which went to attorneys after other legal expenses were paid.²⁵⁸ Settlement checks were mailed to plaintiffs on September 19, 1995.²⁵⁹

On April 21, 1993 the clay cap covering the pits split open releasing toxic fumes into the air and causing another shock of fear through the Glen Avon community, where many residents chose to continue living. Remedial construction—the installation of an onsite treatment facility, horizontal extraction well and a pipeline to carry wastes—continued from 1990 to 1995.²⁶⁰ Though the site is no longer considered “hazardous,” the bevy of noxious substances still dispersed in the soil of the now-covered pits will not be fully cleaned for another 300 to 400 years.²⁶¹

²⁵³ Feldman, Paul. “Stringfellow OKs Settlement of Toxic Waste Suit.” *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 1991. http://articles.latimes.com/1991-09-25/local/me-2527_1_toxic-waste.

²⁵⁴ Gorman, Tom. “Final Settlement Is Approved in Waste Dump Case.” *Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 1994. http://articles.latimes.com/1994-11-18/news/mn-64310_1_final-settlement.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ “Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11”: 13.

²⁵⁸ Stammer, Larry B. “Toxic Waste Suit Settled for \$18 Million : Environment: Glen Avon Residents Will Receive Payments for the Dumping at Stringfellow Acid Pits. Agreement with Aluminum Firm Is Largest Settlement yet in Long Battle.” *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 1991. http://articles.latimes.com/1991-06-04/news/mn-186_1_glen-avon.

²⁵⁹ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 63.

²⁶⁰ United States Environmental Protection Agency. Region IX San Francisco, CA. *5 Year Report for Stringfellow Hazardous Waste Site Glen Avon, CA*. Oakland: CH2M Hill, 2001. Print:18.

²⁶¹ *Remembering Stringfellow*.

Desperate Times Call for Desperate Measures

Much like other housewife activist movements, the women at Stringfellow and their actions became increasingly radical as government became less responsive. Though the decision allowing for removal of the site came rather quickly, the lack of dedication to carry this action through continuously increased frustrations and desperation within the community. In the beginning of her organizing, Newman held the base belief she would be provided with the protection and information necessary to build a healthy life.

Through time she explains how her perception changed, “that’s how I really got involved in environmental health issues. It was that personal discovery, and the disillusionment in government itself, in that people were making decisions about my family, and I had nothing to say about it.”²⁶² Again, Newman mentions her family in relation to her anger, equating her radicalization with her motherly duties. Throughout the radicalization of CNA’s activism, the group kept a close tie to motherhood, framing their increasingly radical actions in a caring light.

The group’s ideology became more centered on the belief that Newman describes as: “politicians respect power a lot more than they do politeness,”²⁶³ throughout the course of their protests. These women increased their use of innovative and radical actions, alluding to inspiration from Love Canal and radical student movements. At first, the radicalization was mostly in terms of ideology. At a community meeting held to inform the town about the discovery of radiation at the pits, Newman’s frustration was demonstrated by a slip in her speech. Newman says, “At one point after hearing officials say, ‘We appreciate your concerns’ for the twentieth time, I lost it and yelled at them ‘All you appreciate are your damn reports’. [...] One of the young children I knew from school, came up to me and said, ‘Mrs. Newman, you said a naughty word’.”²⁶⁴ Newman’s mention of a child from her classroom connects her with the stereotype of a caring elementary teacher, a stark contrast with the image of her spewing “dirty” words at governmental authority. Additionally, Newman says she “lost it” with the constant

²⁶² “Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11”: 2.

²⁶³ Ibid. 9.

²⁶⁴ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 34.

ignoring of community concerns, displaying disillusionment with government that often leads to the radicalization of formerly conservative citizens. The use of swearing continued when CNA used a “Bureacratic BS” chart at a public meeting to explain the town’s health results. These types of protest exhibit an increasing lack of regard or respect for political authority and an indication of a radicalizing perspective on the Stringfellow situation and likely politics in general. This radicalization became more outwardly prevalent when CNA adjusted their tactics to gain more media and thus governmental attention.

Housewife Dena Larson baked “algae” cookies for delivery to executive officer of the regional board Jim Anderson after he claimed foaming ponds were just rich with nutrients. Larson incorporated the chemical tainted water into a batch of “gray” cookies delivered to Anderson. Larson claimed, “I haven’t tasted them because I think they’re slime. If he thinks it’s algae, he can eat them. Algae is very nutritious.”²⁶⁵ Larson’s mention of nutrition and the baking imagery evoked by the cookies again harken to her motherly identity. Challenging Anderson’s claims with a publicity stunt featuring toxic cookies is a classic example of housewife radicalization, combining elements of dramatic and potentially dangerous protest with domesticity. CNA also began a polluter of the month award, painting a 55-gallon chemical drum gold and presenting it to a company at their headquarters each month.²⁶⁶ Though not necessarily “radical,” the polluter of the month award is reminiscent of radical street theater, indicating potential inspiration from earlier radical movements.

Newman’s radical tactics went as far as vandalism, when in 1986 she plastered over billboards against Prop 65, the Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act, with a banner reading, “Warning: Paid for by Chevron Major Cal. Polluter.” Of the campaign Newman says, “We had even planned ahead having attorneys and bail money waiting in case we were caught. What fun!”²⁶⁷ The casual attitude expressed in Newman’s exclamation of fun indicates increasing comfort with radical protests, which she understands are radical because of the potential for legal retribution. Though CNA

²⁶⁵ Richardson, James. “Water Quality Official Won’t Eat Cookies Made of Pits Slime/algae.” *The Press Enterprise* 14 May 1983: Print.

²⁶⁶ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 55.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 44, 45.

did not go so far as to stage a hostage situation, it is likely that historical influences from Love Canal both pushed the Stringfellow group towards radical action and decreased the need for it. Comparisons between the two sites gave Stringfellow some attention and associated the site with previous radical actions by LCHA. As women within CNA became more radicalized, they moved closer to a joint and self-constructed identity of housewife activist. As sociologist Andrew Szasz writes, “Their new political understandings, their anger, or their deeply felt ethic of responsibility made them, however reluctantly, accept the role of ‘activist’.”²⁶⁸ When politicizing their actions and motherhood, women become increasingly militant as their personal feelings of care were effectively expressed in actions demonstrative of anger designed to subvert the unjust societal system of toxic contamination.



Anti-Prop. 65 billboard with Newman's vandalism, undated. Remembering Stringfellow: 44.

²⁶⁸ Szasz, Andrew. *Ecopopulism: Toxic Waste and the Movement for Environmental Justice*. University of Minnesota Press, 1994. Print: 154.

“We had to do it ourselves”²⁶⁹

In the wake of the bulk of the Stringfellow crisis, Penny Newman and many in Glen Avon were transformed. As journalist Jack Hitt explains, in assessing the aftermath, one must question: “Did Stringfellow destroy a community or create one?”²⁷⁰ Though the pits embroiled the community in tensions both in their relationships with each other and their governing bodies, Stringfellow created a dynamic movement of housewife activists and was successful in increasing recognition for toxic waste contamination throughout the country. The women of Glen Avon formed a new construction of citizenship and challenged preexisting notions of womanhood. This phenomenon is echoed throughout the country where “blue-collar women recognize the power they wield in bringing moral issues to the public, exposing the contradiction between a society that purports to value motherhood and family, yet creates social policies that undermines these values.”²⁷¹ At Stringfellow, CNA women challenged this societal structure with radical action and governmental accountability, securing their demands.

After her work at Stringfellow, Newman became a full-fledged environmental justice activist. Though Newman still frames much of her activist discussions in terms of working-class motherhood, she now also incorporates racism. This transition indicates a larger one within the United States environmental movement, as environmental justice became a crucial aspect of the movement in the 1990s. Still she often explains environmental justice in terms of women and children as she writes, “Those receiving the brunt of this increased poisoning are the women and children living either in the poor, rural areas or in urban ghettos and barrios.”²⁷² In this way, Newman’s activist origins as a housewife are clear, but it is also noticeable that her paradigm has shifted to a more political and “expert” expression of environmentalism. Newman cites increasing confidence and disillusionment with government as main factors in her formation of an activist identity. “I don’t expect much from government anymore, I expect even less

²⁶⁹ *Remembering Stringfellow*: 24.

²⁷⁰ Hitt: 9.

²⁷¹ Krauss: 113.

²⁷² *Killing Legally with Toxic Waste: Women and the Environment in the United States*: 51.

from politicians,' the former Republican said. 'They help you if their agenda coincides with yours'.²⁷³ Rather than accepting politicians' excuses, those in CNA "really grew a lot of confidence in the fact that, you know, we live in the community and we see things, and we can digest this."²⁷⁴ Those involved in female community activism must readjust their existing beliefs in the infallibility of government, instead focusing on their known and lived experiences of community life. As geographic scholar Hilda Kurtz details, "In the EJ movement in particular, [...] activists' roles are complicated by competing constructions of public and private, insider and outsider, expert and layperson."²⁷⁵ Disregarding these arbitrary classist and gendered boundaries, CNA recognized "the ambiguous lines between public and private spheres"²⁷⁶ and formatted this ambiguity for their own activist interests. In realizing "what we brought to the table was common sense,"²⁷⁷ housewife activists in Glen Avon and beyond challenged traditional expressions of expertise and redefined community activism.

Newman and others in Glen Avon and the wider Inland Empire are still fighting toxic contamination and environmental threats. With the increase in the importance of logistics in Los Angeles' inland port, Glen Avon has undergone marked changes. According to Newman, "within a matter of just a couple of years our Mira Loma area went from a very rural area of dairies and vineyards to being an all warehouse district."²⁷⁸ Learning from past actions, Newman helped advocate for a lawsuit against the "illegal deposition of hazardous materials"²⁷⁹ from the nearby San Bernardino BNSF Rail Yard which "has the highest level of cancer risk of all rail yards in the State of California. Thirty-three hundred in a million. Instead of one in a million that the EPA calls for. It's the highest risk [Newman has] ever seen at a Superfund site or any other facility."²⁸⁰ Newman's willingness to spearhead new movements demonstrates her increased

²⁷³ Feldman.

²⁷⁴ "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11": : 7.

²⁷⁵ Kurtz, Hilda E. "Gender and Environmental Justice in Louisiana: Blurring the boundaries of public and private spheres." *Gender, Place and Culture* 14.4. (2007): 409-427. Print: 410.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 412.

²⁷⁷ "Interview with Penny Newman 12/6/11": 3.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 14.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 16.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 14.

confidence in her activist skills. In interviews, actions and writings Newman identifies with housewives and the issues that affect them, but she also places importance on her self-made role as an activist, demonstrating her ability to combine aspects of her identity to form a personal conception of self.

Chapter 4.

The Radicalization of Anti-toxics

The anti-toxics movement gained increasing ground in the 1970s and 1980s with a partial push from working-class housewife activists who embraced community toxic contamination as their fight. Through their activist work, these women engaged in a public self-formation of identity that combined personal constructions of self as related to being a housewife, an activist and a citizen. Much as theorist Judith Butler explains, “If there is something right in [Simone de] Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in a process, a becoming, a constructing.”²⁸¹ In the same way, the construction of working-class housewife anti-toxics activism movements was “a process, a becoming, a constructing” which combined aspects of radicalized politics, community relations and personal ideals of femininity. Working-class women combined previous housewife activist influences with radicalization to manufacture their distinct housewife activist movement. These women embraced radicalism that is not often historically paired with womanhood. Kathleen M. Blee argues, “the invisibility of women is due to the overly restrictive way in which we *define* radicalism. In popular understanding, and often in scholarship, to be radical, nearly by definition, is to be male”.²⁸² Working-class housewife activists refused to accept this gendered categorization of their citizenship as apolitical or of their views as moderate, instead radicalizing their movement and increasing its success.

An essential aspect of working-class housewife activism in this period was the self-realization and formation that evolved from the radicalization process associated with anti-toxics advocacy. In their processes of radicalization, these women gained autonomy in their self-definitions as activists and citizens. In turn, the radicalization of the movement allowed for increased media attention and recognition within the American political and public landscape for toxic contamination issues. As Love Canal’s Lois Gibbs once said, “the media ‘loves women and children, especially visual media.’”²⁸³ In fact, “Sociological studies of television news have described television’s preference for

²⁸¹ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990. Print: 43.

²⁸² Blee: 2.

²⁸³ Hay: 117.

‘disorder’ stories that feature disasters, victims, protesters, and its stylistic preference for stories with plenty of action and color, as well as for stories where abstract social issues can be personalized.”²⁸⁴ Radicalizing housewife activists offered the media a carefully calculated chemistry of drama, human emotion and scientific expertise. Media and academic photographers consistently captured photos with children and family at the forefront—Gibbs clutching her daughter Missy at a rally or children from Glen Avon pressed against a window with signs begging for their release from toxic chemicals. Housewife activists knew much like they themselves began caring for all children who might be affected by toxic waste contamination, the American public, after viewing visceral images of suffering children or strong families, would stand behind their plight. Emotional images ran alongside news stories in small papers like the Inland Empire’s Press-Enterprise and in larger news sources and books. By radically demonstrating how “disorder” had shaken up their world, these women gained attention for the movement and shifted beliefs about the effects of chemicals.

While these women were originally influential in their community connections and organization skills, radicalization elevated housewife activism to a level of recognition unattainable without groundbreaking action. Throughout the process of radical transformation, "Radicalization at the organization level has been matched by radicalization at the personal level. Naturally enough, that process is seen in its most dramatic form in the lives and ideas of the movement's core of leaders,"²⁸⁵ such as Gibbs and Newman. These women, most originally conservative housewives, have reconstructed identities that meld their self-selected conceptions of femininity with radical activist ideologies and “dramatically shift[ed] perspective in their understanding of political life.”²⁸⁶ As time progresses, these women, as Szasz says, “accept the role of 'activist'.”²⁸⁷ In accepting this “role” as part of their identity, as well as shifting to a more radical ideology in terms of conceptions of government, the environment and likely other political matters, these women construct a new sense of self. This reorganization of identity defines the power behind the housewife activist movement in allowing housewife

²⁸⁴ Szasz: 41.

²⁸⁵ Ibid. 153.

²⁸⁶ Krauss: 109.

²⁸⁷ Szasz: 154.

activists to mold their own identity as they become more committed to a radicalized anti-toxics movement.

Redefining Femininity in Community Activism

Radicalization in working-class housewife activist movements not only gained media attention for the movement, but also redefined socially constructed ideals of femininity in community activism. In asserting new meanings of female participation in politics and community organizing, housewife activists reshaped sections of the environmental movement. Prior to housewife activist involvement in anti-toxics, the movement was mostly unrecognized and segregated as a public works issue—off-limits to the private sphere concerns of wives and mothers. Community organizing has traditionally existed as a gendered phenomenon,²⁸⁸ which housewife activists were forced to subvert in their environmental advocacy. This activism existed “along a public-private dichotomy, in which women focus on household and the family, and men on the local state and neighborhood resources,”²⁸⁹ When women did involve themselves in community activism, they more often than not focused on issues essentialized as “nurturing and empowering,” geared toward socially constructed ideas of femininity²⁹⁰ or maternalism as “empowered motherhood.”²⁹¹ Working-class housewife activists in anti-toxics, though they do utilize a nurturing framework, also demonstrate their authority as experts, undertaking their own health studies and using confrontational protests, as well as insisting on their rights to health as citizens.

In order to subvert traditional roles of femininity in community activism, housewife activists first had to redefine existing conceptions of public and private. The binary view of public and private spheres has existed within historical consciousness since the industrial revolution. While suffragettes, flappers and other feminist actors worked to weaken the conceptualized divide between these two areas of life, the spheres historically remained largely intact. Housewives, as a social symbol, are defined by their

²⁸⁸ Martin, Debora. “Constructing the ‘Neighborhood Sphere’.” *Gender, Place and Culture* 9.4 (2010): 333-350. Print: 333.

²⁸⁹ Ibid. 333.

²⁹⁰ Ibid. 333, 334.

²⁹¹ Hay: 124.

existence within the private sphere. However, housewife activists step outside of this sphere, politicizing “private matters” and blurring the lines between the two dimensions. To begin with, “many are mobilized by a sense of chemical intrusion in their homes and communities and the sense that a protective boundary between public and private spaces has already been violated or transgressed.”²⁹² As Penny Newman explains, the feeling of losing authority over decision making in your own home breaks an existing psychological barrier, offering these women the desire to fight back in a community atmosphere. As environmental historian Sherilyn MacGregor details, “The association of activism and publicity (and the concomitant depoliticization of the private sphere) is challenged when women choose to regard household issues as political issues and thereby make their homes a focus of their activist engagement.”²⁹³ By politicizing the sphere that was originally apolitical, women working with a housewife activist framework reshape spherical debates to suit their activist purposes. In the anti-toxics movement in particular, the private/public divide has expanded to include constructions of “insider and outsider, expert and layperson.”²⁹⁴ In incorporating expertise into understandings of self as housewives, mothers, activists and knowers for their community—women work to dispel marginalization from authorities that deem them “hysterical housewives.”²⁹⁵ Housewife activists reestablish and altogether evaporate boundaries of what is acceptable behavior for women, especially lower-class women, within the ambiguous definitions of public and private spheres. These women destabilize this societal structure as well as those societal expectations that unjustly rest on them as working-class women.

After redefining public/private boundaries, housewife activists step further to widen conceptions of femininity and their own perceptions of identity, whether they are associated with femininity or not. By asserting the traditional “feminine” identity of the housewife in an untraditional feminine way, housewife activists contribute to the widening view of what it means to be a woman and an activist. As theorist Judith Butler explains, “I work within the norms that constitute me. [...] Those norms are the condition

²⁹² Kurtz: 412.

²⁹³ MacGregor: 184.

²⁹⁴ Kurtz: 410.

²⁹⁵ Ibid. 419.

of my agency and they also limit my agency.”²⁹⁶ Defining themselves as housewife activists gave these female community advocates entrance into public service in a somewhat unthreatening way, but they were also often marginalized for their supposed lack of expertise. Though housewife activists did not undermine the rhetoric of care often associated with women,²⁹⁷ they did somewhat challenge traditional female roles within community and public works, making strides for women in political spheres. As the concept of environmental justice became more integrated into the anti-toxics movement, other aspects of identity became more intertwined with interpretations of gender identity. As historian Nancy Unger writes, “In addition to sex, other factors, including race, ethnicity, and class, help construct gender roles, and the culture that results can change dramatically over time. These complexities must also be incorporated to appreciate fully the differences that gender, sex, and sexual identity have made in shaping men’s and women’s attitudes toward, and relationships with, the environment and each other.”²⁹⁸ Those participating in housewife activism incorporated class issues into their anti-toxics activism and shifted feminine roles within their communities. This new formulation of identity follows along the lines of Engelhardt’s ecological feminism that “argues that race matters, gender matters, class matters, and that all of us have complicated identities.”²⁹⁹ This ideology associates more closely with environmental justice than ecofeminism, demonstrating the environmental movement’s shift away from traditionally essentialized views of identity.

Lasting Impressions on the Environmental Movement

Previous to many housewife activist movements in the 1950s, and even to this day, the environmental movement was saturated with male authority. Though earlier white middle-class housewife activist movements did make strides in establishing women’s roles within the movement, they also navigated around traditional power structures to engage in community conservation. Later, anti-toxics housewife activists also worked around the male-dominated power structures of governmental regulating

²⁹⁶ Kurtz: 413.

²⁹⁷ MacGregor: 58.

²⁹⁸ Unger: 8.

²⁹⁹ Engelhardt: 4.

bodies. However, because anti-toxics activists became increasingly militant in their strategies and alliance with the media, their movement was more successful in carving a lasting niche for women in the environmental movement, especially in terms of grassroots organizing. These women, in their use of a nurturing framework, incorporated ideals of motherhood as a publicly accepted and validated aspect of activism.

In constructing a lasting impact on the environmental movement, these women were influenced by radical student movements, feminism and environmentalism. Both feminism and environmentalism are mobilizing movements that have pushed people, especially women, into political advocacy in the 20th century.³⁰⁰ In turn, these women have pushed back, creating a lasting impact in American political expectations for activists and a widened definition of environmentalism. Though housewife activists did not consciously subscribe to feminist rhetoric, their methods and actions utilized feminist principles in asserting female autonomy in the public and private spheres. According to sociologist Celene Krauss, “Central to feminist theory and practice is the notion of consciousness-raising, the reinterpretation of the individual, private experience of oppression as a public, political issue.”³⁰¹ By incorporating these aspects of feminist theory, along with a lack of sympathy for environmental oppression, working-class housewife activists subverted aspects of the environmental movement that were historically male and middle-class dominated. This linking of a reinterpretation of radical feminism and environmentalism³⁰² categorized the importance of housewife activists in denying aspects of the essentialism of homemakers and white working-class women. The organizations utilizing housewife activist rhetoric and technique also contributed to the popularization of grassroots organizing aside from the existing political system and infrastructure. Housewife activists focused on female autonomy, family and community—intertwining feminism, environmentalism and radicalism into a new segment of the environmental movement and a defining aspect of the anti-toxics movement.

³⁰⁰ Somma: 153.

³⁰¹ Krauss: 109.

³⁰² MacGregor: 25.

The type of organizing done by housewife activists also had lasting impacts on legislation and governmental precedent. Love Canal, as one of the first cited examples of housewife anti-toxics activism, forced the local Niagara Falls, New York state and national governments to recognize the severity of contamination in the area and organize the proper handling of the issue. When those in the community did not believe political bodies were dealing with the contamination adequately, they used the media to demonstrate as such. In the wake of Love Canal, CERCLA was passed, which is often directly attributed to activity within and pressure from the community.³⁰³ Though it is difficult to denominate all responsibility to a relatively privileged community in terms of its ability to garner media attention, the importance of said media attention in pressuring political actors cannot be discounted. Countless other actors and historical themes within politics, culture and the environmental movement had additionally pressured Superfund legislation but Love Canal and community movements like it were essential in gaining its public support. When Superfund was in place, Stringfellow and community movements that also followed the legislation were instrumental in pushing Superfund enforcement and accountability. Later, in 1985 several states passed Right to Know laws, forcing companies to report to communities the emissions resulting from their manufacturing.³⁰⁴ National Right to Know passed in 1986.³⁰⁵ Publicizing all aspects of anti-toxics community movements, and gaining this publicity because of the emotional association of motherhood and radical protest, housewife anti-toxics movement had lasting changes on actual political infrastructure and the environmental movement.

Additionally, as housewife activists worked to frame their discussion of anti-toxics in terms of health, these activists contributed to the budding environmental justice movement. In current environmental discussions, environmental justice is an imperative and unavoidable paradigm that encompasses all environmental issues. According to environmental scholar Thomas H. Fletcher, “As a form of social justice concerned with equity and fairness in environmental management, environmental justice has emerged as

³⁰³ Schnaiberg: 260.

³⁰⁴ Ventura, Kira Naomi. “Everyone’s Backyard: CHEJ’s 25 Years of Progress.” *The Clearinghouse* 24 (2006): 3-15. Print: 4.

³⁰⁵ Ibid. 4.

an important consideration in public policy.”³⁰⁶ Though housewife activists clearly did not entirely shape the environmental justice movement, as the movement itself is culled from issues of class, race and gender, of which housewife activists focused on only some, these women did contribute in popularizing common understanding about some types of environmental injustices. These women continually asserted those living in their communities and all communities not only deserved but had a right to healthful lives not challenged by toxic chemicals. Though anti-toxics movements are environmental in nature, they were also considered in terms of social justice issues³⁰⁷ advancing political and public consciousness about environmental justice as a dimension of the environmental movement.

Others’ Voices

Though housewives did have a dominant hand in defining the anti-toxics movement, their presence in this specific movement and the environmental movement in general must be placed within the wider context of those who experienced similar plights but were not offered recognition for their fears or demands because of their marginalization within society. Anti-toxics housewife activists, though marginalized by gender and class discrimination, were able to avoid much of this marginalization because of their utilization and reappropriation of their housewife status as an activist tool. However, patterns of environmental justice demonstrate that people of color and other subordinated groups living in toxically-contaminated communities like Love Canal and Stringfellow have received little to no media attention for their attempts at gaining clean-up for their communities. As environmental sociologist Robert D. Bullard notes, “the ‘Black Love Canals’ exist and may go unnoticed.”³⁰⁸ While housewife activists did work on environmental justice, this issue is much greater than these women, encompassing issues of race, class, gender and more. Love Canal, as a household name associated with toxic contamination has “become symbolic of a social movement when there are many

³⁰⁶ Fletcher, Thomas H. *From Love Canal to Environmental Justice: The Politics of Hazardous Waste on the Canada-U.S. Border*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2003. Print: 12.

³⁰⁷ Engelhardt: 4.

³⁰⁸ Bullard: 19.

examples of similar campaigns elsewhere”³⁰⁹ that go unrecognized. In working towards equitable solutions in terms of environmental degradation and distribution, especially in terms of toxic contamination, environmental justice must be considered and understood to ensure rights to health and life. Housewife activists realized solutions for their communities because of their flexibility to utilize and restructure pre-assigned societal roles and gain access to media attention based on existing privilege—a key element not available to most fighting anti-toxics battles.

³⁰⁹ Mellor: 17.

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